

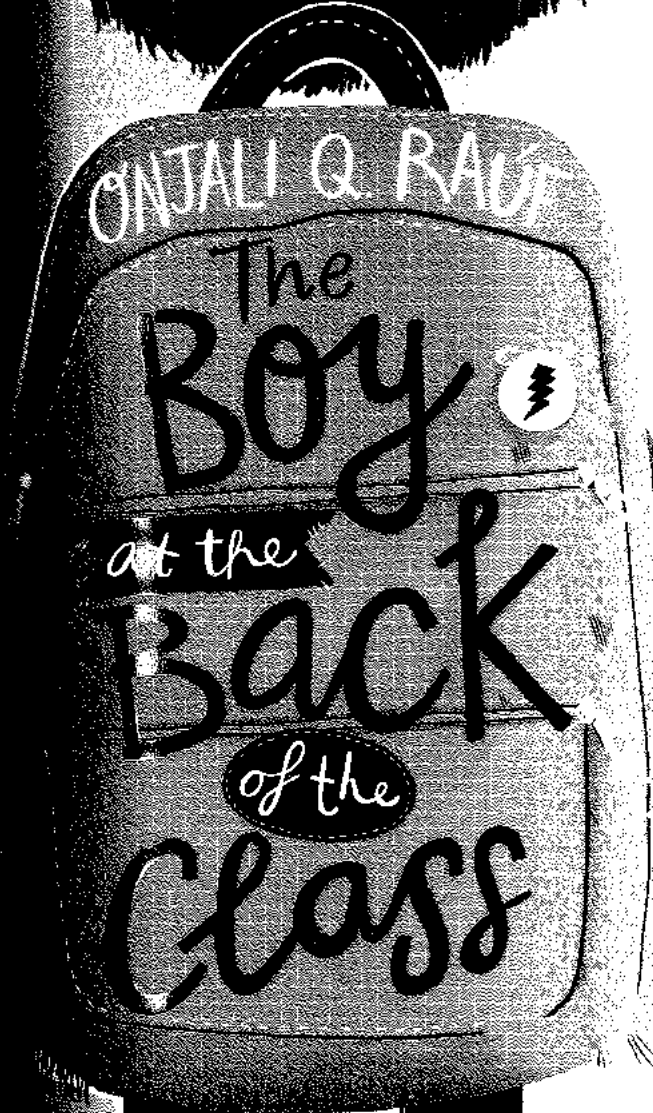
**T**here used to be an empty  
 chair at the back of my class,  
 but now it now has a name called  
 "Albert" sitting in it.

He's nine years old (but he's real),  
 but he's very strange. He never talks  
 and never smiles and doesn't even like  
 getting the chair, which is my favourite!

One time I learned the truth. Albert  
 isn't even a boy. He's a Refugee  
 who ran away from a War. A real one  
 with bombs and bullets that hurt people.

He came to live out about him,  
 but now I want to help.

That's when my best friends Jesse,  
 Michael and Tom came in. Because  
 together we're team up with a plan.



ONJALI Q. RAUF

The  
**BOY**  
 at the  
**Back**  
 of the  
**Class**

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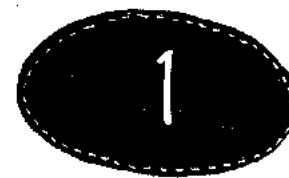
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## THE EMPTY CHAIR

There used to be an empty chair at the back of my classroom. It wasn't a special chair. It was just empty because there was no one sitting in it. But then, one day just three weeks after school started, the most exciting thing that could ever happen to anyone, happened to me and my three best friends. And it all began with that chair.

Usually, the best thing about starting a brand-new term is that you get extra pocket money to buy new stationery with. Every year, on the last Sunday of the summer holidays, my mum takes me on an Extra-Special Adventure to hunt down my stationery set for the new school year. Sometimes I get so excited that my feet feel jumpy inside and I don't know which shop I

want to go into first. There aren't many nice stationery shops where I live – they only ever have boring dinosaur sets for boys or princess sets for girls. So Mum takes me on the bus and train into the city where there are whole streets of shops – even huge department stores that look like tall blocks of flats from the outside.

Last year, I found a space-themed set with pictures of an astronaut floating past the moon. It was on sale too, so I bought a pencil case, a maths set, rubbers and a long ruler – and still had nearly a pound left over! The ruler is one of my favourite stationery pieces, because the astronaut floats across it in water mixed with silver stars. I played with it so much that the astronaut got stuck to one side and couldn't be bothered to move again. But it wasn't my fault. Mr Thompson, our teacher last year, had such a boring voice that my hands needed something to do. That's why it's important to have fun stationery with you in class – because you never know when you'll need to stop your brain from falling asleep or doing something that might get you into detention.

This year, I bought a Tintin and Snowy set. I love Tintin. Even though he's only a character in a comic

book and isn't real, I want to be just like him when I grow up. I think being a reporter and getting to solve mysteries and go on adventures must be the best job in the world. My mum and dad used to buy me a brand new Tintin comic book for my birthdays, and Mum saves all the comics her library are about to throw away because they're too old or ripped and gives them to me, so I have a whole collection of them now. I've read them all at least fifty times. But I'll have to think of another pet to travel with because I'm allergic to dogs. I don't think cats or hamsters or even trained mice could be half as useful as a Tintin's dog, Snowy. And even though I've thought about it for at least a year now, I still haven't come up with anything.

Because the Tintin stationery set was a lot more expensive than the astronaut one and wasn't on sale, I could only buy a pencil case, a small ruler and two rubbers. I had to think about it for a very long time but in the end, I decided spending all my pocket money in one go was worth it. Not just because everything had Tintin on it, but because if you press a button on the pencil case, Snowy barks and Captain Haddock's voice cries out 'Blistering barnacles!'. I've already been told

off for pressing it in the middle of maths class this year, but if you can't press a barking dog button in maths then I don't see the point of it.

I don't like maths. Simple maths is fine, but this year we're learning about long division and square numbers and all sorts of things that my brain doesn't like doing. Sometimes I ask for help, but it's embarrassing putting your hand up too many times to ask the same question. I'm lucky because Tom and Josie and Michael always help me with the things I get stuck with. They're my best friends and we do everything together.

Tom's got short spiky hair and a side-smile and a big Adam's apple that looks like a ping-pong ball got stuck in his throat. He's the smallest in our group but he's also the funniest. He only joined our class last year after his parents moved here from America, but we became friends instantly. He has three older brothers who all tease and bully him. Not seriously – only for a joke. But I think they steal his food too which is why he's so skinny and always super-hungry. I once saw him eat a whole pizza with extra toppings and a double cheeseburger for lunch and still not be full up! So I hide my snacks and chocolate bars from him when I can.

Josie has large, brown eyes and at least a million freckles across her face. She's tall and gangly and is always chewing on her hair. She's the fastest girl in our year and can kick a football past any goalie from the other side of the pitch. She's the coolest person I know, and I've known her since we were three. Our mums say we became instant friends the first day we started nursery, so they decided to become friends too. I don't really remember much about myself at that age, but Josie is in all my school memories. We even got our first detention together last year – all because of a hamster called Herbert.

Josie had heard one of the upper school bullies say that he was going to flush our class hamster, Herbert, down the toilet at home-time. Josie told me, and we decided to go on a Hamster Rescue Mission. We hid Herbert in my rucksack before home-time and took him straight to my house. But of course, Mum found out and made me take him back the very next day. I tried to explain to boring Mr Thompson what had happened, but he wouldn't listen and gave me detention. And even though she didn't have to, Josie stood up and said she had helped to steal Herbert too – just so we

could do detention together. You know a friend's a Best Friend when they're willing to sit in detention with you.

Michael has the neatest, puffiest Afro out of all the boys in our year. Most people think he's weird. But not us. His glasses are always broken, and his shoelaces are never done right, so he's always tripping up or bumping into things when he walks. But we're all so used to it now that we never notice. He's mostly quiet but when he does say something, grown-ups usually look impressed and say that it's 'ingenious' or 'insightful' or use other strange words beginning with 'in'. I don't know what they mean, but I guess they mean he's clever. Grown-ups always like coming up with long words for simple things.

Michael gets made fun of a lot because he can't run fast or kick a ball in a straight line, but he doesn't care. I wouldn't care either if I was as rich as him. His dad is a professor and his mum is a lawyer, and because they're always busy, they buy him all the latest gadgets and books and the coolest new games. When we went to his house last year for his birthday party, we saw his room for the first time. It looked like the inside of a toy store. I think it must be easier not to care about what people think when you've got that many toys in your life.

Josie and Michael are always competing with each other to see who can get the most gold stars and As in class. Michael is the best at history and Josie is the best at maths. But I'm better at reading and spelling than both of them – especially Josie. She hates reading and never, ever reads anything outside class. She says she doesn't have an imagination, so there's no point to reading books. I find that strange, because how can anyone not have an imagination? I think she must have had one when she was younger but that it was knocked out of her when she fell off her bike last summer. Mum says people without imaginations are dead inside. I don't think Josie is dead anywhere – she talks too much.

Having three best friends can make school seem like the best place to be, even on the most boring day. Although this year, school has become a whole lot more fun – and that's because of our new teacher, Mrs Khan.

Mrs Khan has extra bouncy hair and always smells of strawberry jam – which is much better than smelling of old socks like Mr Thompson used to do. She's new to the school and extra clever – much cleverer than Mr Thompson ever was. And she gives us prizes on Fridays when we've all been good. No other teacher in our year does that.

Mrs Khan lets us do all sorts of interesting things that we have never done before. In the first week of school, she helped us make musical instruments out of things we found in the school's recycling bin, and in the second week, she brought in a brand-new comic book to read to us that wasn't even in the school library yet.

Then in the third week, something happened that was so surprising and made everyone so curious, that even Mrs Khan couldn't make us focus on our lessons properly. And it all began with the empty chair.

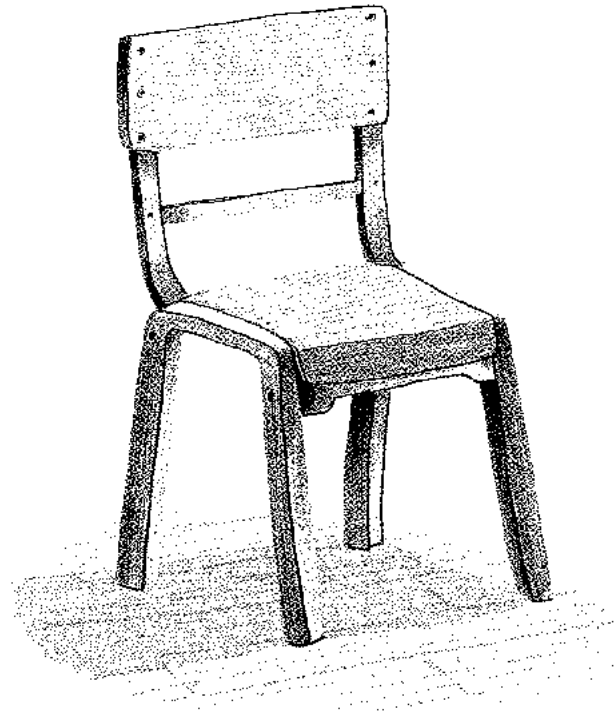


It was on the third Tuesday after school had started, and Mrs Khan was taking the register. She was just about to call my name when there was a loud knock at the door. Usually when there's a knock on the door it's just someone from another class bringing a note, so no one really pays any attention; but this time it was Mrs Sanders, the Head. Mrs Sanders always wears her hair in the exact same way and peers over her glasses whenever she talks to anyone. Everyone is scared of her, because when she gives detention, she doesn't just make you sit in a room; she makes you memorise long

words from the dictionary and doesn't let you leave until you've learnt them all off by heart – the meaning AND the spelling. I've even heard of lower graders being stuck in detention for hours because they had to learn words that were as long as this page!

So when we saw that it was Mrs Sanders at the door, we all fell silent. She looked very serious as she walked up to Mrs Khan, and we all wondered who was in trouble. After she had whispered and nodded for a few seconds, she suddenly turned around and, peering over her glasses at us, pointed to the empty chair at the back of the class.

All of us turned around to have a look at the empty chair. This was the chair:



As I said, it was a pretty ordinary chair, and it was empty because a girl called Dena left our class at the end of last year to move to Wales. No one really missed her except for her best friend Clarissa. Dena had been a bit of a show-off and was always talking about how many presents her parents got her every week and how many pairs of trainers she had and all sorts of other things that

no one else cared about. She liked to sit at the back of the class because then she and Clarissa could pretend to be doing lessons when really they were drawing pictures of their favourite pop stars and giggling about someone they didn't like. Someone else could have taken the seat, but no one really wanted to sit next to Clarissa. That's why the chair had stayed empty.

After whispering for a few more seconds with Mrs Khan, Mrs Sanders left the classroom. We expected Mrs Khan to say something, but she seemed to be waiting, so we waited too. It was all very serious and exciting. But before we could start guessing about what was going on, Mrs Sanders came back, and this time she wasn't alone.

Standing behind her was a boy. A boy none of us had ever seen before. He had short dark hair and large eyes that hardly blinked and smooth pale skin.

'Everyone,' said Mrs Khan, as the boy went and stood next to her. 'This is Ahmet, and he'll be joining our class from today. He's just moved to London and is new to the school, so I hope you'll all do your very best to make him feel welcome.'

We all watched in silence as Mrs Sanders led him to



the empty chair. I felt sorry for him because I knew he wouldn't like sitting next to Clarissa very much. She still missed Dena, and everyone knew she hated boys – she says they're stupid and smell.

I think it must be one of the worst things in the world to be new to a place and have to sit with people you don't know. Especially people that stare and scowl at you like Clarissa was doing. I made a secret promise to myself right there and then that I would be friends with the new boy. I happened to have some lemon sherbets in my bag that morning and I thought I would try and give him one at break-time. And I would ask Josie and Tom and Michael if they would be his friends too.

After all, having four new friends would be much better than having none. Especially for a boy who looked as scared and as sad as the one now sitting at the back of our class.



## THE BOY WITH THE LION EYES

For the rest of the day I kept sneaking glances over my shoulder at the new boy and noticed that everyone else was doing the same.

Most of the time he kept his head down low but every so often I'd catch him staring right back at us. He had the strangest coloured eyes I'd ever seen – like a bright ocean but on a half-sunny, half-cloudy day. They were grey and silvery-blue with specks of golden-brown. They reminded me of a programme I saw about lions once. The camera operator had zoomed into a lion's face so much that its eyes had taken up the whole screen. The new boy's eyes were like those lion's eyes. They made you want to never stop staring.

When Tom joined our class last year I had stared at him a lot too. I didn't mean to, but I kept imagining that he came from an American spy family – like the ones you see in the movies. He told me later that he had thought there was something wrong with me. The new boy probably thought there was something wrong with me too, but it's hard to stop staring at new people – especially when they have eyes like a lion's.

We had geography in first period that morning, so we couldn't get up to say hello to the new boy. Then at break-time I looked around the playground for him but couldn't see him anywhere. In second period we had P.E. but the new boy didn't join in; he sat in the corner staring at his rucksack, which was red with a black stripe on it and looked very dirty. I thought he must have forgotten his P.E. kit because his bag looked empty and saggy. I tried waving at him, but he never looked up – not even once.

Whenever we do P.E. I like to pretend that I'm training to join Tintin on an adventure, and have to be the super fastest human being on the planet. The only problem is my legs aren't as long as I want them to be yet, so even when I jump as hard I can, I always get

stuck in the middle of the vault. Every birthday, I make a wish that I'll grow at least four inches taller, and I drink as much milk as I can so that my bones will stretch. But even though I'm nine and three-quarters now, I've only grown one-and-a-half inches since my last birthday. Or at least that's what my mum says. I tried my best to jump over the vault in one go in front of the new boy, but I got stuck again. Luckily, he didn't see me because he was staring at his rucksack the whole time.

After P.E. we had lunch-break, and Josie, Tom, Michael and me decided we would try and find the new boy so that he wasn't all on his own. We waited right next to the playground doors. But the new boy never came out. Tom even went to check the boys' toilets because that's where he had tried to hide on his first day when he didn't know anyone, but there was no one there.

'Maybe he's having lunch with the lower grades by mistake?' said Josie. But when we got into the lunch hall we couldn't see him anywhere.

In the afternoon we had history, and we were split into groups, but the new boy was allowed to sit on his own and not join in. Mrs Khan spent more time with him

than she did with any of our groups, and she was pointing at things in a new workbook she had gotten him.

'Maybe he's deaf?' someone whispered.

'Maybe he can't speak English?' muttered someone else.

'There's definitely something wrong with him!' whispered everyone.

That afternoon I don't think any of us learnt about what it was like to be a gladiator living in Roman times, because we were all too busy whispering about the new boy. He must have known what we were doing because his face was red the whole time. Then, at last break, he disappeared again.

'He must be inside,' said Michael, after we had finished searching the whole playground for the third time in a row. By now, my lemon sherbets were getting sticky in my pocket and beginning to look like bright yellow fuzballs.

At home-time, everyone was still talking about the new boy and wondering who he was. I think it was because a whole day had passed, and no one knew anything about him except for his name. Not even Clarissa – and she had been sitting right next to him!

People kept running up to her to ask if the new boy had said anything to her, but she just shook her head and said he was using a lower year workbook, so his reading and writing mustn't be very good.

On our way to the bus stop, we saw everyone crowding around Jennie just outside the front gates. Jennie is famous in school for always knowing something about everything, so we ran over to hear what she was saying.

Jennie is in the class next door and has the longest hair in school. She likes to spy on people and then tell stories about them to other people. Sometimes the stories are true, but most of the time they're only half-true because she makes things up. Last year she told a story about Josie cheating in a football match by pretending to fall down so she could get a penalty kick. But I was there and so was Tom, and we both saw her fall down after being kicked in the leg by an upper boy called Robert. She had a big fat bruise on her leg the shape of Australia for weeks afterwards! But no matter how many times we showed everyone the bruise and told them what really happened, no one believed us. Not even the people who were there.

Sometimes I think everyone likes to believe a lie even when they know it's a lie because it's more exciting than the truth. And they especially like to believe it if it's printed in a newspaper. I know that now. I also know why Mum says politicians are liars and always shouts at them whenever they come on the telly. Maybe Jennie will be a politician when she grows up.

When we got closer, we heard Jennie telling everyone that the new boy had spent all his break-times with Mrs Sanders because he had done something bad in his old school, and was too dangerous to be let out into the playground with us. But I didn't believe her; I could tell Michael didn't believe her either, because he asked her how she knew so much about it. Jennie got angry and crossed her heart and hoped to die that she had heard Mr Owen talking to Mrs Timms outside the teachers' staff room, and that both of them had said how sorry they felt sorry for Mrs Khan and how glad they were that the new boy wasn't in their class because it wasn't going to be easy to deal with. But before we could ask her any more questions, Jennie's dad began to beep at her from his car, so she ran off.

We all watched her go and then looked back through

the school gates to see if the new boy had come out. But we couldn't see him anywhere.

'He's probably left already,' said Josie.

Tom and Michael nodded. 'Let's just wait two more minutes,' I said, hoping that he would still be inside. And I was glad I did, because a few seconds later, the new boy came out into the playground. He was holding Mrs Khan's hand and staring at the ground. A woman who was waiting by the outdoor benches suddenly shouted, 'Cooo-eeee!' and ran over to them. She was wearing a long brown coat, a woolly hat and a bright red scarf. She stood and talked to Mrs Khan for a long time and nodded an awful lot, but we couldn't hear anything because we were standing too far away.

'I wonder if that's his mum,' said Josie. I didn't think so because the new boy didn't hug her at all, and seemed shy around her too.

'Come on,' said Michael. He was pointing to his watch which was beeping like a submarine. Michael has a special watch that tells him when the next bus is coming. It's meant to help him get to places on time, but I've only ever seen it make him bump into things more quickly.

'No! Wait!' I said. And before I could think about it too much, I ran over to where the new boy was standing.

'Hello!' I said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Mrs Khan and the woman in the red scarf looked down at me as I reached into my pocket and got out the lemon sherbet. 'Here!' I said, holding it out. I was a little bit embarrassed because by now the sherbet was covered in fluff. But it was still good enough to eat. That's the good thing about lemon sherbets. No matter how bad they look, they still always taste delicious.

I think I must have spoken too loudly because the new boy took a step away from me as though he was frightened.

'It's all right, Ahmet, you can take it,' said the woman, motioning to him with her hands as if she was speaking in sign-language.

But the new boy grabbed her hand and hid his face behind her arm. I didn't know what to do because I've never really scared anyone so much before that they wanted to hide away from me. The woman spoke to him gently again, and after a few seconds he took the sherbet and looked straight at me with his lion eyes before hiding away again.

'Thank you,' said the woman. She looked at me and gave me smile. I liked her deep brown eyes because they seemed kind and her bright pink cheeks. But what I liked best of all was how her long blonde hair swirled around in the wind from underneath her hat. 'Ahmet will enjoy that on the ride home.'

I nodded and then ran back to where Josie and Tom and Michael were waiting for me. I felt extra happy because Mrs Khan had smiled at me with her whole face and had given me a wink too – just like my dad used to do whenever he thought I had done something good or when he was teasing my mum. When I'm a grown-up I'm going to wink at people just like he used to do and make them feel special too. And as we made our way home, I decided that the next day, whenever I saw the new boy staring at me, I was going to give him just as many winks as I could.

# 3

## FORTY WINKS

The next day, and the next day and the next day after that, I smiled at the new boy and gave him a friendly wink, just as often as I could. My goal was to give him at least forty winks a day because that's what Mum says everyone needs, but after a while my eyebrows started to feel funny. I could tell the new boy was finding it interesting because he stopped looking at everyone else and kept looking at me. But then Michael saw me trying to wink with both my eyes, one after the other, and said I looked like I needed a doctor. He probably said that because I can't wink with my left eye as well as I can with my right eye. So I decided to stop winking quite as much.

That week Mrs Khan was teaching us all about photosynthesis and gave each of us a small pot with

a seed in it to look after. Everyone was excited because she said there would be a prize for whoever grows the best plant. Even the new boy got one and I think it made him happy because he kept on looking at it. I tried to whisper lots of cheerful words like 'rainbow' and 'popcorn' and 'marshmallows' to mine, because I read somewhere that if you tell plants about happy things it makes them grow quicker. I'd never won a prize before. Not even at the fairground. I thought if I tried really hard and kept talking to my plant, I might win this time. And if I couldn't win then I wanted the new boy to, because he really seemed to like that plant.

But I was worried about Brendan-the-Bully-Brooker. He's the Class Bully. His cheeks are always pink because he spends most of his time chasing anyone smaller than him around the playground. He's not very clever and hates anyone that is. If anyone gets a top mark in class or a prize, he'll try and beat them up at home-time. I saw him looking at Ahmet's plant and narrowing his eyes, just like he always does when he's thinking of something mean to do. I didn't like it one bit.

His most common trick is to trip you up with his

foot. He also likes to tip up your lunch tray as he walks by so that your food dribbles down your chest like runny eggs. He's done that to me a few times. Sometimes he gets caught. But most of the time he doesn't. And even when he does get caught, he doesn't get detention.

Most of the teachers seem to like him though. Maybe it's because when he smiles, he looks like one of those boys that sing in a church choir on television. Mr Thompson used to call him 'a rascal' – which must be a good word because he gave Brendan-the-Bully a wink and a pat on the back whenever he said it, and then let him run off again. That made everyone else in class – except for Liam and Chris, Brendan-the-Bully's only two friends – hate him even more. Even the bullies in the upper years find him annoying. It's funny how bullies don't like other bullies. Maybe it stops them from feeling special. But in school everyone knows who the bullies are, and who they like to bully, and no two bullies can go after the same person. It's a strange system. But those are the rules and everyone sticks to them. Even the teachers.

But Mrs Khan is different.

She doesn't seem to like Brendan-the-Bully as much

as the other teachers. She's always watching him and ever since we were put in her class, he's been careful not to do anything around her. I'm still going to keep an eye on him though.

Soon after the new boy joined our class, lots of rumours about him began to be passed around the playground like an invisible game of pass-the-parcel.

Most people believed Jennie and said that the new boy must be dangerous and that's why he was never allowed out. But then other people started saying he had a super contagious disease, and that was the real reason why we weren't allowed to talk to him. The disease rumour scared Clarissa so much that she tried to sit as far away from him as she could without leaving her chair. One time she leaned over so far that she crashed right onto the floor! She didn't lean away so much after that, but she always put her arms up or used an exercise book as a divider.

I didn't think the new boy looked in the least bit dangerous or like he had an infectious disease, so the rumour I thought sounded the most true was the one that said he was from a super-rich family, and that his parents had sent him to our school under-cover so that he wouldn't

be kidnapped. Michael said kidnappers wouldn't come to our school to look for him because it wasn't in a posh area and Tom agreed. He said that when he had moved from America, his older brothers had told him they must be poor now because they were going to live in the Poor End of London and not in the Rich End. I didn't really understand what he meant, because London doesn't have ends. On maps it just looks a spilt blob of jam.

I wanted to ask the new boy if the rumour about the kidnappers was true, and if he needed us to become his bodyguards. But he was still doing all his lessons on his own, and every break-time and lunch time he would disappear, so no one except for Clarissa could talk to him. And she didn't want to! I tried to catch his eye so I could smile at him and whisper 'hello', but Mrs Khan caught me and told me to pay attention to my work.

Next I tried to send him a note made into a paper plane – because I'm good at those – but it flew wonkily and hit Nigel on the head instead. He's a tattle-tale and told on me straight away. I hate tattle-tales because they seem to like getting people into trouble more than anything else in the world, and they always smile when they're doing it. Mrs Khan came and took the note and

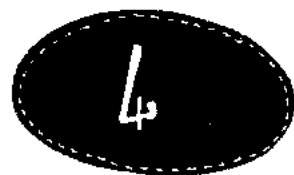
read it just to herself. She shook her head at me, but I think she must have found the drawing I made funny because her mouth gave a tiny smile that only I could see. Even though I didn't get told off, I knew it would be too risky to send any more messages by air mail. Especially with tattle-tales around.

The next day at break-time, Josie, Tom, Michael and I decided to follow the new boy and find out where he was going. But Mrs Khan caught us following him in the corridors and told us not to do it again. She didn't seem angry, but she did say that the new boy needed to be in 'Seclusion' for a little while longer, and that it was for his own good, so we promised not to follow him any more.

'What does "Seclusion" mean?' asked Josie when we went back out into the playground. None of us knew exactly, not even Michael, although he said it sounded as if the new boy needed to have private treatment like a really sick person in a hospital, so maybe he did have an infectious disease after all.

But it wasn't long until we found out what Seclusion really meant, and why the new boy needed so much of it.





## WHAT MR BROWN AND MRS GRIMSBY SAID

My dad used to say that if you really, really want something, you have to keep on trying for it. And since he always used to say that he had everything he could ever want, I guessed he must have known all about trying for things.

I knew that I wanted to be friends with Ahmet. I didn't really know why, I just did. I gave up on trying to speak to him during the day – because of all the Seclusion he needed – but I figured after school was OK, because Mrs Khan had smiled at me and winked that first time. So every day for two whole weeks, I waited by the school gates at home-time.

As soon as the new boy and Mrs Khan came out to meet the woman in the red scarf, I would run over and give the new boy a lemon sherbet – and sometimes a whole

chocolate bar. But no matter how many sweets I gave him or how much Mrs Khan encouraged him to talk to me, the new boy never said a word, and he never, ever smiled back. Not even when I gave him a whole packet of white mice, which are my favourite. He just quietly took the sweets and, staring at the floor, went and stood behind the woman in the red scarf as if he needed to hide from me.

'Maybe he doesn't like sweets,' said Michael, on the Friday of the second week.

'Don't be silly,' said Josie, chewing on her hair. 'Everyone likes sweets!'

'Maybe he's allergic?' said Tom. I'd never heard of anyone being allergic to chocolate and sweets before, but then again, I was allergic to dogs when no one else was. So maybe he was right.

After that, I decided to give the new boy my lunch fruit instead of my sweets. He was still going to his Seclusion every lunch-time, so on the Monday of the third week of trying to be his friend, I took the biggest orange I could find from the school canteen and waited by the gates. I was extra excited because I had drawn a smiley face on the skin, and Tom had given me a sticker of a dinosaur to stick on it – so that was two things that

made the orange extra special. Tom loves collecting stickers – he has books and books of them at home and whenever he gets a new one he likes, he always brings it in to show us. I've never seen him give a sticker away to someone he doesn't know very well, so I hoped the new boy would like it and know how special it was.

But as we were waiting for the new boy to come out, we heard something about him that we didn't understand at all. In fact, it was even more confusing than learning about the Seclusion he was being given.

There were lots of grown-ups standing behind us at the gates – there always are at home-time. Sometimes, they talk about the news or what they're making for tea. But mostly they talk about the weather. I don't know why, because there's nothing more boring than talking about something everyone else can see for themselves, but I guess that's what you're meant to do when you become a grown-up.

Usually we don't listen because we have more interesting things to talk about, like what we're going to watch as soon as we get home and who our favourite Olympic athlete or footballer is. But this afternoon, just after someone had said how sunny it was and wasn't it lovely and how they hoped it would be sunny again

tomorrow, someone else said, 'Have you heard about the new refugee kid that's joined the school? He's been put in Mrs Khan's class. They can't find an assistant that speaks his language. Poor little blighter!'

Josie and Michael and Tom all looked over at me and I looked back at them and then we stood very still together. I knew we were all thinking the exact same thing, because our faces frowned at the exact same time: we were wondering what a Refugee Kid was doing in our class.

Then the lady who had talked about the sun said, 'It'll cause trouble – you mark my words. They're only coming over to take our jobs!'

Carefully, so that no one else would see us, we all looked over our shoulders, and saw that it was Mr Brown and Mrs Grimsby who were talking.

Mr Brown shrugged and then said, 'If he's from that awful war on the news, I feel sorry for the kid. Can't blame 'em for wanting to get out of that death trap.'

'Hmph!' said Mrs Grimsby. 'A bother, the whole lot of 'em! Wouldn't trust one as far as I could throw 'em. Just you wait and see – it's our kids who will suffer, just because these ones are coming over to do whatever they like ...' I could tell that Mr Brown didn't like

what she was saying, because he frowned and shook his head and then took a step to the side.

I like Mr Brown. He's Charlie's dad. Charlie is one of the boys in upper school. Everyone knows who he is because he always steals at least three puddings from the pudding tray every lunch-time so there's never enough to go around. He's also famous for setting off the fire alarm to get out of a science test. He's always getting into trouble. But I don't think Mr Brown knows about that because whenever he cries out, 'Charlie my ol' boy! What have you been up to today?' and Charlie says 'nothing', Mr Brown beams at him. Charlie tells everyone that his dad is a boxer, but I don't think that can be true. He has a long beard, and if I was a boxer fighting him, I'd just pull his beard all the time and win.

I looked to the right over at Mrs Grimsby, her face all sour and pink and angry, and decided I didn't like her very much. She's the grandmother of a girl called Nelly who's in the year below us. Nelly's one of the most popular girls in school, mainly because she's won every burping competition the school's ever had. She can even burp-sing famous songs and is always challenging everyone to try and beat her.

I was looking up at Mrs Grimsby and thinking about all the things she had said when Josie suddenly poked me on the arm. 'Look!'

When I looked back through the railings, Mrs Khan and the new boy were in the playground and already talking to the woman with the red scarf. So I ran just as fast as I could and gave the new boy the special orange.

As usual, he didn't say thank you and he didn't smile, but I saw his eyes widen when he saw the drawing of the smiley face and the sticker on the orange. And for the first time ever, he looked up at me with his lion eyes and didn't look away. I knew right away that he wasn't frightened of me any more.

I stared back and gave a small smile. I wanted him to know that it didn't matter if he was a Refugee Kid. I still wanted to be his friend. I think he must have understood, because he gave me a nod that no one else could see. I wished he had smiled back, because you can only ever know that a person's really your friend when they like you enough to smile back at you. But it was OK because the nod felt like a promise, and I knew that I wouldn't have to wait too long before the smile followed.



## THE REFUGEE KID

When I got home that night, I stayed up for as long as I could and waited for my mum to come back from work. It's always half past nine by the time she gets in on Mondays because Mondays are late-nights at the library. I'm supposed to be in bed by then or she gets cross, but I didn't mind being told off – not if it meant I could find out what had made the new boy a Refugee Kid and why Mrs Grimsby thought they caused trouble and took people's jobs all the time.

On the bus home, Michael said Refugee Kids came from big tents in the desert. But then Josie said that no one was allowed to live in tents in England except for when they were going on a camping trip, because it was against the law. And Tom said he'd heard of

refugees on the television but couldn't remember why they were running away, and that England didn't have any deserts with lots of tents in it anyway. It was all very confusing, but I knew my mum would know because she works in a library, and libraries have books about everything.

My mum is amazing and the most cleverest person I know – even cleverer than Mrs Khan. She works two jobs – she's a librarian during the week and on Saturdays, she's a carer. She looks after people who can't eat or walk or remember things properly any more or who are too sick to live on their own. Because Mum has to work all the time, I don't get to see her lots – except on Sundays. Sundays are our special Adventure Days – we used to have them all the time with my dad. Whenever he had a day off, he would wake us up early, pack a lunch and we'd set off in the car for an adventure! Usually to the seaside or a safari park, or, if the weather was cold, for bowling or a movie.

We can't really afford to do any of those things now, because when I was six years old, my dad died in a car crash. Sometimes I worry that I'm forgetting him,

even though I miss him every day. But when I think hard and dive right down into the deepest part of my brain, he's still there. He was the funniest dad anyone could ever have. He used to be a carpenter and loved to build things out of whatever he could find.

This is what Dad looks like in my memory:



He always talked a lot more than Mum and loved to make up stories. But more than anything, he loved listening to music. He had a huge music collection, and he was always fixing the old-fashioned record player my grandfather had bought for him for his thirteenth birthday. He taught me how to play the big black discs

on it and how to polish the large golden sound horn properly.

Mum was going to sell it last year to help pay the bills – because apparently the older something is the more money it's worth. Only for things, that is – not people. But luckily my Uncle Lenny made her give it to me instead. Uncle Lenny's my mum's brother and is the best uncle in the world even though he's married to my Aunt Christina who I don't really like, and has a son called Jacob who likes breaking things. He tries to visit us at least once a week, usually on his own. He's always asking me if there's anything I need. I love that about him. And I'll always love him for helping me keep Dad's record player. It's in my room now, but I never play music on it unless Mum is out of the house. She doesn't like me using it very much. I think it reminds her of when my dad used to dance around with her after he'd made a chair or table he was proud of, and it makes her too sad.

I had been playing one of my dad's favourite old records to stop myself from falling asleep, when I suddenly heard my mum's key in the door. You can always tell when it's her key in the door and not my

Uncle Lenny's, because it jangles the loudest. I quickly turned the song off and ran to the living room.

'Well, hello there, munchkin!' said Mum. I could tell she was surprised to see me because her eyebrows had jumped up and disappeared into her hair. 'What are you doing up so late?'

'I can't sleep,' I said.

'Ah!' she said. Giving me a hug, she looked at me with a frown and touched my forehead. She always touches my forehead when she's worried about me.

'You're not feeling ill, are you?'

I shook my head.

'Have you had your supper?'

I nodded. I usually have a tin of soup and a bread roll for supper on the nights Mum can't make it home in time for dinner. Mrs Abbey from next door comes and helps me make it when she knows I'm going to be on my own. She's old and has trouble walking, but sometimes she makes me fish fingers if she's feeling well. My favourite soup is tomato soup because it reminds me of tomato ketchup. Ketchup is one of my most favourite things to eat in the whole wide world. You can add a dollop of ketchup to any dish that's not

a dessert, and I'll bet you my pocket money it'll make that dish taste instantly better! It's third on my list of top foods, after chocolate and ice cream that comes in a cone from an ice-cream van.

'Well then,' said Mum, as she put her bags down. 'Let's see if a little hot chocolate doesn't put you to rights! Come and keep me company while I have some tea. I'm not that hungry today.'

I followed Mum into the kitchen and watched her get out the cocoa jar and switch on the kettle. And then before I knew it, I asked, 'Mum, what's a Refugee Kid?'

I didn't really mean to blurt it out like that, but sometimes my mouth does things my brain isn't ready for.

Mum stopped what she was doing and stared at me.

'A *refugee kid*?' she asked, with a frown on her face. 'Where did you hear those words?'

'At school,' I said. 'Someone called the new boy in our class a Refugee Kid.'

'You've got a new boy in your class?'

I nodded.

'And Mrs Khan didn't tell you anything about him?'

I shook my head. 'Only that he's called Ahmet and he's never been to London before. I've been trying to make friends with him, but he doesn't talk to anyone so I can't tell if he wants to be friends back . . .'

'I see . . .'

Mum fell silent. She poured the milk into the milk pan, and waited for it to heat up. I knew she was thinking about something serious, because she was rubbing her chin a lot. Mum only ever rubs her chin when she is about to say something serious.

'Mum?' I whispered.

But Mum stayed silent which made me start to worry. Mum usually answers my questions right away. Maybe what Mr Brown had called the new boy wasn't a nice thing to call him at all.

While I waited for my hot chocolate, I went and sat down in my chair and looked out of the window. Our flat isn't very big but we have a small table near the window with four chairs around it. I always sit in the chair next to the fridge because I like being able to open the fridge door without getting up. It's like looking into an extra room in the house – but one that's filled with food instead.

Whenever I go to my Uncle Lenny's house I always

look in his fridge, because his one is so big it almost touches the kitchen ceiling. If he had to, my Uncle Lenny could live in his fridge. He'd have to take out all the shelves and things, but he could definitely live in it standing up if he wanted to. I think it's good to have a fridge that's big enough to stand in. It means you'll never run out of food like we do sometimes. And if you do, you can go and have a wonder in it.

When Mum had finished making the hot chocolate and her tea, she sat down in her chair which is opposite mine, and took out two lumps of sugar from the sugar jar. Keeping them balanced on a spoon, she slowly swirled them into the tea in little circles. We both watched them get smaller and smaller until they disappeared.

'Mum . . . can you tell me then? What's a Refugee Kid – I mean, where do they come from?'

Mum gave me a look. She has at least twenty different looks that give me a secret message, and I know what all of them mean. This one meant, *stop asking me*. Then she said, 'Do you remember those lifeboats on the telly, darling? The ones with lots of people squeezed in that you were asking about?'

I nodded. It had been in the middle of the summer holidays. Mum and I were in the sitting room. She was doing a crossword and I had been colouring in some drawings I had done, and the news was on in the background. The TV screen had suddenly changed from a woman reporter standing on a beach to a video of lots of people in boats in the middle of an ocean, all looking scared. I had felt sorry for them and asked Mum what was going on.

'Do you remember what I said?' asked Mum.

'You said . . . that they were trying to find somewhere new to live because their home wasn't nice to live in any more.'

'Exactly, my love. They were what people call *refugees*. And children like the new boy in your class are called refugee kids, because they've had to leave their homes, and travel very far to try and find a new house to live in.'

'Do you mean like Dena?' I asked, wondering if Dena was going to be called a Refugee Kid in her new school too. She had to move to Wales because her mum and dad couldn't find a house in London.

Mum shook her head. 'Not exactly,' she said. 'Dena's mum and dad *wanted* to move. They had a

choice, and they wanted to live in a much bigger, nicer house than the one they already had. But refugee children have been *forced* to run away – because bad people have made it impossible for them to stay. Those bad people drop bombs on their houses and destroy all the beautiful parts of their cities. And the places where the refugees used to live have become so horrible and so scary that they can't live in them any more. So they walk for miles and miles and get into boats to travel to countries they've never been to before, and go to strange places they don't know, just so they can find somewhere that's safe enough to live in again.'

'Oh,' I said quietly. I wondered what the refugees had done to make the bad people so angry. Last year, two first graders in school had tripped over Brendan-the-Bully to get back at him for chasing them, which made him so angry that he smashed open their lunch boxes and stomped on all their food.

'What did the refugees do to make the bad people want to hurt them?' I asked, thinking it must have been something very bad to make someone want to drop a bomb on their houses.



Mum shook her head. 'Nothing at all, darling. The bad people are just much stronger than they are, and like to feel big and powerful by bullying them. You see, some people think that by taking things away from other people and hurting them, it gives them more power. And the more power they have, the more they want, and the greedier they get. So they go on hurting more and more people until everyone wants to run away.'

'Just like the bullies at school!' I said, feeling angry.

'Well . . . I guess it is sort of like that,' smiled Mum. 'Except the bullies the refugees are running away from are a lot bigger and far more horrible. They force people to leave everything they ever had behind. Even the people they love most in the world.'

I thought about the new boy and felt sorry for him. Maybe he had been forced to leave behind lots of things that he loved most in the world, and that's why he didn't talk to anyone and needed so much Seclusion. I tried to think of what I would leave behind if I had to run away from lots of bullies. But I couldn't decide. All I know is that I could never leave my dad's record player

behind – or his favourite hammer, which is still in the bottom kitchen drawer.

Mum got up and took her mug to the sink. 'Now, I know you want to make friends with this new boy, but you mustn't be too eager. He'll need lots of time and space first. OK?'

I nodded, even though I didn't really understand what she meant. If I was the new boy, I would use up all my time to make as many friends as I could – especially if I had just run away from bullies that were bigger and more horrible than the bullies at school! I wondered if I should tell my mum about all the lemon sherbets and white mice and the orange with the smiley face I had given him, but then she said, 'The world has never been kind to refugees,' in a sad way. She sounded just like she did whenever she talked about my dad. So even though I wanted to ask at least four more questions, I decided not to say anything else.

'Now drink up and off to bed! And I'll come and tuck you in, in just a few minutes.' Mum came and ruffled my hair. She always ruffles my hair when she wants me to think she's happier than she really is.

I drank the rest of my hot chocolate just as quickly

as I could and ran to bed. Mum only ever tucks me into bed when she's home early, so this was a special treat. I love being tucked into bed – even more than I love beating everyone else in a race or scoring a goal. It's the best feeling in the world to be wrapped up all warm and fuzzy in a blanket by someone you love more than anyone else on the planet, and who loves you right back.

As I lay waiting for Mum to come in, I thought about all the things she had said – about the bombs and the boats and the bad people who were so greedy that they made everyone want to run away from them. I had so much to tell Josie and Tom and Michael! Especially as I don't think their mums and dads would have told them half as much as my mum had told me.

It's one of the things I love most about Mum. She always tries to answer my questions no matter how tired she is or how hard my questions are. And she always tells me the absolute truth. Michael's parents are always saying 'Not now dear' or 'We'll tell you when you're older', and Josie's mum keeps telling her that girls are meant to be quiet and not to ask so many questions. But my mum never says anything like that

to me. I think it's because of all the books she reads. Mum says that the best books leave you with more questions than answers, and that that's the fun part – you have to try and find the answers for yourself somewhere else. And Dad used to say that the more questions you ask, the more clever you'll be. Because that's the only way you'll ever know more than you already do.

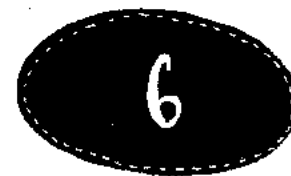
I think this is the first time in my life that I've ever wanted to be extra, *extra* clever about anything, because by the time Mum had come to tuck me in for the night, I had a long list of questions in my head that I wanted to ask the new boy. Eleven exactly. This is what they looked like:

### My 11 Questions

1. Where did you have to run away from?
2. What language do you speak?
3. Who's the woman in the red scarf?
4. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
5. What did the bullies do to make you run away?
6. Did you have to get on a boat like the people on the news?

7. What sports do you like best?
8. What's your favourite fruit?
9. How far did you have to walk to get away from the bullies?
10. Do you like it here or do you miss your old house more?
11. Do you have a best friend?

My eleven questions would help me know everything I needed to know about the new boy so that I could be his friend. And I was going to find out the answer to every single one of them.



## THE WOMAN IN THE SILVER SCARF

As soon as I got to the bus stop the next day, I told Josie and Tom and Michael everything my mum had told me about Refugee Kids, and about how the new boy had probably had to get on a boat with no toilets on it so that he could run away from bombs and all the other bad things that the bullies had done to his country.

'But my dad said Refugee Kids are dangerous, and that they lie and steal things,' said Josie, looking confused. 'He told me to stay away from the new boy and not to talk to him, because he was probably a criminal!'

'But *my* mum and dad said we should be extra nice to him. Look!' And opening up his rucksack, Tom showed us a big bag of sweets. 'Mum said to give these

to him at lunch-time. *And* she said we had to be nice to him and not to ask him too many questions.'

'My mum said the same,' said Michael as we got on the bus to school. 'Except she told me to give him a banana. And my dad said Refugee Kids were running away from the war that's on the television all the time. He didn't say anything about any bullies!'

We all looked over at Josie, who was chewing on the ends of her hair and frowning. She didn't say anything, but I knew she was thinking that her dad must have made a mistake. There was no way the new boy could be dangerous or a criminal – not when he was the same size as us and had just run away from bullies and a real war.

Mr Thompson had taught us all about wars last year. It had been a special year for wars and Mrs Sanders said it was our duty not to forget about them. We learned about red poppies and how they were the most important flower because they grew on soldiers' graves, and about how lots of countries had joined up to fight in the very first war. The upper years did an assembly about it and we went on a special day trip to the Tower of London where the Queen keeps

her crown, because that's where millions of red poppies had been put in its gardens and stuck on its walls.

Mr Thompson said we should never forget how many people have died in wars to save us, but I can't remember long numbers, especially ones that keep going up all the time. But I'll never forget that castle. It had looked like it was bleeding. And later on that day, a man who knew all about the first big war gave us an extra-special lesson inside the castle. His name was Officer Denny. I remember him because his name rhymed with my Uncle Lenny's.

Everyone liked him because he was funny and knew everything there was to know about bombs and uniforms and a sad place called Flanders Field. He picked me and Michael to try and hold up a rucksack that was the same size and weight as a real soldier's rucksack. But it was so big and heavy that we couldn't even lift it up off the ground!

Remembering Officer Denny's rucksack made me wonder if the new boy had to carry lots of heavy things in his rucksack when he was running away. Maybe that's why it looked so old and dusty. He still didn't

have a new one – but that week he had started to wear the school uniform. He must have found the new shirt and jumper itchy because he kept pulling at the collar whenever he thought no one was looking.

That day the bus to school was late and got stuck in so much traffic that the driver let everyone get off early. We had to run half the way and by the time we got to the playground, the bell had started ringing. I was hot and sweaty and feeling icky when we got into class, so I didn't realise that everyone was quieter than usual. But after a few minutes, I noticed that Parvinder and Dean – who were clever at everything and sat at the front of the class – kept looking over their shoulders. At first, I thought they were looking at me because my face was still red, but then I heard Parvinder say, 'Wonder who she is!'

I turned around and saw a grown-up sitting in Clarissa's seat. And not just any old grown-up, but one who was talking to the new boy! And the new boy was talking back to her!

I poked Josie in the arm and said, 'Look!'

Josie turned around and whispered, 'Where's Clarissa?'

We looked around the classroom and then saw that Clarissa was sitting at the end of our row on Felicity and Natasha's table. She looked much happier.

'Hurry up and settle down please!' said Mrs Khan, as she picked up the register. 'Before we head to assembly, I want to introduce someone very special to you. But let's make sure you're all here first!'

After she had finished calling everyone's names, Mrs Khan said, 'Now class, I want you all to say good morning to Ms Hems, our new class assistant.'

Ms Hems stood up and smiled at everyone.

'Good morn-ing, Ms Hems!' we all said. Half the class shouted it out, and the other half said it quietly – as if they weren't sure Mrs Khan had given them the right name to say. I shouted it out. I like shouting out new names. It makes them feel more real.

Ms Hems smiled and said, 'Good morning, everyone!'

'Ms Hems will be helping Ahmet with his lessons from now on. If we're very lucky, in a few weeks, she will be helping Ahmet do a presentation about his home town, and how he feels about being here in London.'

Everyone turned to stare at Ms Hems as she nodded and smiled and then sat back down.

'She looks nice,' whispered Josie. 'I like her scarf!'

I looked back over my shoulder because I liked the scarf Ms Hemsy was wearing on her head too. It looked like a silver river and it had a diamond pin clipped on to one of the sides that looked like a star. She had one of those smiles where the person smiling never shows any teeth, but I liked it. And her eyes looked like they'd been drawn around with thick black pencil which made them look bigger and more interesting.

The new boy seemed to like her too and when she sat back down, she whispered something to him and patted him on the back which made him nod. I felt happy for him. He had someone to talk to, and he didn't have to sit next to Clarissa any more. It's much nicer to sit next to someone who isn't always trying to get away from you all the time and has a diamond pin in her scarf.

All that day, the new boy did his lessons at the back of the class, and at break-time and lunch-time he went to Seclusion as usual. But, maybe because Ms Hemsy was with him, he didn't look at the ground so much and seemed more interested in everything we were doing. I caught him staring at me and Josie twice before

lunch-time and three whole times in the afternoon, and I was sure he wanted to be friends with us now.

At home-time, we waited just as we always did by the gates – but this time, all of us had something to give him. Josie had saved her chocolate yoghurt pudding from her lunch box for him especially, and Michael and Tom had the bag of sweets and the banana their mums and dads had told them to save. Today I had an apple to give him – because the school canteen had run out of oranges. But it was OK, because Tom had given me a sticker of a whale to put on it, so it was still special.

As we were waiting, I crossed my fingers and secretly hoped that Ms Hemsy would come out with the new boy too, because since she could speak to him properly, she would be able to ask him some of my eleven questions.

The playground had started to empty by the time the new boy finally came out, holding both Ms Hemsy's and Mrs Khan's hands. As they made their way over to the woman in the red scarf, Michael whispered, 'Come on!' I could tell he was excited because his eyes had gotten wider. Michael's eyes always get wider when he can't wait to do something.

We all ran over to the new boy and gave him our gifts.

'This is from me,' said Tom, holding out the large bag of sweets like it was a trophy. 'There are cola bottles in there – and flying whizbees and some toffee melts too!'

'And this is from me,' said Josie, holding out the chocolate pudding. 'It's my favourite!'

'Er . . . this is just a banana. But look!' said Michael, turning it over to show the new boy the row of stick men he had drawn on it.

'And this is from me,' I said, holding out the apple.

The new boy looked up, his arms full, and gave us each a happy nod. I could tell it was a happy nod and not just an ordinary nod because even though his mouth wasn't smiling, his lion eyes looked happy.

Ms Hemsî bent down and said something in a foreign language into the new boy's ears. He nodded and then, looking up at us, said very slowly, 'Thank . . . you . . . friends.'

Josie, Michael, Tom and me nodded and beamed, and then, all at once, started talking.

'Do you want to come play football with us tomorrow?' shouted Tom. 'At break-time?'

'I'll get you another one of those puddings tomorrow if you like them!' exclaimed Josie.

'I'll ask Mum to give me something better than a banana!' cried out Michael. 'What about some mini muffins?'

'And I'm going to get something better than an apple tomorrow! What's your favourite fruit?' I asked.

The new boy looked at us and then looked up at Ms Hemsî and Mrs Khan and then at the woman in the red scarf. They were all smiling and the woman in the red scarf ruffled his hair just like my mum had ruffled my hair the night before.

'Now, kids,' said Mrs Khan, bending down so that her face was the same height as ours. 'These are all wonderful gifts. And I know Ahmet is thankful for them. But he needs to learn just a little bit more English before he can answer your questions, OK?'

We all looked at each other, and then at Mrs Khan, and then nodded.

'But I do think that's a very good idea of yours, Tom. Maybe Ahmet *would* like to play football with

you tomorrow at break-time!' Ms Khan looked over at Ms Hemsî, who gave a nod. 'Yes, that's a very good idea.'

'Awesome!' said Tom, and he was so excited that he gave the new boy a thump on the arm. The new boy looked at Tom and then at his arm as if he wasn't quite sure what had just happened.

'And there's no need to give him so many presents every day,' said the woman in the red scarf, laughing. 'It's so lovely, but we don't want to rot Ahmet's teeth now do we?'

We all shook our heads.

'If you still want to give him something at home-time, just choose one thing between you all and that'll be more than enough. OK?'

We all nodded, and then I cried out, 'Ms Hemsî!' I hadn't meant to say it so loudly, but I was so excited at the thought of having one of my questions answered that I couldn't help myself.

'Yes?' smiled Ms Hemsî.

'Can I . . . er . . . where is he from? Like, which country? And what language does he speak?' I asked, looking at the new boy.

Ms Hemsî's smile widened – even though she still didn't show any of her teeth. 'Ahmet is from a country called Syria, and he speaks a language called Kurdish.'

'Do you speak that AND English?' asked Josie, looking impressed.

'Yes,' said Ms Hemsî. 'I'm Syrian too.'

'Why doesn't Ahmet speak any English?' asked Tom.

'Well . . .' said Ms Hemsî. 'Because in Syria nobody needs to speak English. Just like you don't need to speak a Syrian language here in England.'

'Oh.' The answer made Tom frown to himself, which meant he was asking himself lots of other questions in his head.

'Now, kids, off you go,' said Mrs Khan, clapping her hands. 'Ahmet needs to get going and so do you. And Tom – I notice you're wearing your brother's trainers by mistake again! Try and make it the last time, OK?'

'Yes, Miss,' said Tom, as he turned bright red.

We waved goodbye and headed to our bus stop. Just before we turned the corner, I looked over my shoulder and saw the new boy take a big bite of the



apple I had given him. I felt even happier than I did when Ms Hemsî had answered my questions! But a second later the feeling quickly disappeared, because that was when I saw Brendan-the-Bully.

He was standing in front of the boys' toilets just a few yards away, and his cheeks were pink and his eyes were narrow, and he was watching the new boy with a scowl on his face. Everyone knows that Brendan-the-Bully hates anyone who's different from him, but it was the first time I had seen him look so angry and mean. He couldn't do anything because Ms Hemsî and Mrs Khan and the lady in the red scarf were there, but as we headed to our bus stop and all the way home, I couldn't help feeling worried. I think I knew right away that the scowl was a warning, and that he was going to make things hard for the new boy and anyone who wanted to be friends with him.

And it turns out that I was right. Because at first break on the very next day, that's exactly what he started doing.



## MR IRONS' NOSE

When the bell rung for first break the next morning, Mrs Khan kept her promise and let the new boy out into the playground for the very first time. Tom was put in charge of looking after him and we were all told that if he got scared or wanted to stop playing, then we were to find a teacher immediately or go and see Ms Hemsî in the staff room. I didn't know why the new boy would be scared of being in the playground, or why he wouldn't want to play with us, but then I thought that maybe in his country, the bullies had been mean to him at school too. I'd never really thought about it before, but maybe there are bullies in everyone's playground.

As Josie grabbed her football, Tom tried to explain to the new boy how to play the game properly.

'YOU! Like THIS!' said Tom loudly, pointing to the new boy, then his foot and then the ball. The new boy nodded.

'But NOT like THIS!' continued Tom, shaking his head before pointing to the football and then his hand.

'This is stupid! He *knows* how to play football!' said Michael.

'Maybe they play it differently in his country. Remember when I got here and I only knew American football?' protested Tom, looking at me as if I knew the answer.

I shrugged. 'I don't know! We should have asked Ms Hems!'

'Oh, come *on!*' cried Josie as we reached the playground. 'Let's just let him try and see if he knows it.'

By the time we had reached our usual corner of the playground, Josie and Tom had decided that the new boy would be on Josie and Michael's team. Since she was the best at football, it wouldn't matter so much if the new boy couldn't play. And because it was just Tom and me on my team, we had the first kick.

After less than a minute of the game starting, the new boy began to run and dribble and do lots of tricks

with the football that none of us could do yet. And within the first five minutes, he had scored two goals.

'Whoah!' said Tom. 'He's even better than Josie!' Suddenly catching Josie's eye, he quickly added, 'Or nearly as good, anyway!'

'Wooooohooooooo!' cried out Michael as the new boy flashed past me and Tom and struck another goal. 'Wooooohooooooo!'

By now, a crowd was beginning to gather to watch the game, and I could hear lots of upper graders and lower graders talking and saying things like, 'Look! The dangerous kid's been allowed out!' and 'Does this mean he doesn't have a disease?' and 'But the kidnappers will be able to see him from here!'

I had just heard Jennie tell everyone that she was sure she had heard Mrs Sanders say the new boy was a professional footballer, when she suddenly cried out 'OOOOWWWW!' and before we knew what was happening, Brendan-the-Bully and his mates, Liam and Chris, had pushed their way onto our make-believe pitch.

Josie looked at me and I looked at Tom, and Tom looked over at the new boy, who was standing next to Michael looking confused.

'We want to play,' said Brendan-the-Bully, a nasty smile on his face. He walked over to the new boy, who had the football, and kicked the ball away so hard that it ended up on the other side of the playground. The new boy took a step back.

'Go away, Brendan,' said Josie, bravely. 'This is our game and that's MY ball!'

Brendan-the-Bully turned around to look at Josie, and she swallowed nervously. But just then his expression changed from mean to sad.

I turned around too and saw that Mr Irons was walking towards us.

'What's going on here then?' he asked, his moustache twitching.

Mr Irons is one of the upper school teachers and is famous for being one of the strictest teachers in school and for never, ever smiling. He has a long face, a long nose, long lips and a large brown bristly moustache that he carries a tiny comb for in the front pocket of his jacket. Everyone knows about the comb, because when he thinks no one is looking he takes it out and combs his moustache with it in short, straight lines. And when he gets very angry you can hear his nose whistling. If

that happens, then you know you're going to get at least one detention or be given a hundred lines to write.

He's also the very worst teacher you can have on break-duty because he hates noises – especially happy noises. Whenever he's in the playground, he walks around telling everyone off for laughing too loudly or for making fun sounds. Last year he made a first-year boy who was playing 'tag' cry by telling him that only pigs squeal, and since the boy was squealing, he must come from a large family of pigs and should spend the rest of break inside. And another time, Mr Irons gave everyone cheering for Handstand Hannah a hundred lines to write for being so loud – even though she was about to beat the world record for the Longest Handstand in History!

Whenever anyone sees Mr Irons walking towards them, they always play more quietly or move away. But we had been so happy that the new boy was playing with us that we had forgotten we were in a school where there were bully bullies and teacher bullies!

'Please, Sir,' wailed Brendan-the-Bully. 'She won't let me play! I wanted to play, and she said I couldn't!'

Mr Irons tutted at Josie. 'That's not a very nice thing to do to your friend, is it?'

'He's not my friend!' said Josie angrily. 'And he didn't ask! He came over and kicked our ball away!'

'Please, Sir, and that boy over there told me I couldn't play too!' added Brendan-the-Bully, pointing at the new boy and smirking.

Mr Irons looked over at the new boy and then beckoned for him to come over. The new boy looked around, and then, realising what he was being asked to do, walked over to where Mr Irons was standing.

'Did you tell this boy he couldn't play with you?' asked Mr Irons, pointing to Brendan-the-Bully.

The new boy looked around again. Everyone else in the playground had stopped what they were doing and were listening to everything that was being said.

'Please, Sir! Brendan's lying,' I cried out, running up behind the new boy.

'Yeah!' added Michael.

'And he's new,' I added. 'And he doesn't spea—'

'When I WANT your opinion, I'll ask for it! But until then, DON'T interrupt me again!' shouted Mr Irons. I felt my whole face go red and my tongue swell up in my mouth. I could see Brendan-the-Bully smirking again, but this time at me.

'Now, boy.' Mr Irons turned to the new boy. 'I'll ask you again! Did you, or did you NOT, tell Brendan he couldn't play with you?'

The new boy stood rooted to the spot and looked over at us.

'But, Sir!' I burst out. 'You don't understand! He can't spea—'

'RIGHT!' shouted Mr Irons, his nose whistling dangerously. 'That's detention for you!' he cried out, pointing to me. 'And you!' he added, pointing to the new boy. 'And you!' he hissed out, pointing to Michael. 'All three of you, come see me after school today. Until then, I'm confiscating this ball!'

Josie watched angrily as Liam handed the ball to Mr Irons with a grin.

As we watched Mr Irons walk off with the ball under his arm, the bell rang for the end of break. Brendan-the-Bully smiled at us.

'See you at lunch, then!' he said, and ran off.

But at lunch-time the new boy was nowhere to be seen, and at second break, Ms Hemi came out with him, so Brendan-the-Bully stayed away from us. At home-time, Tom had to run off to catch the bus because

it was one of his brothers' birthdays. The rest of us decided that, instead of going to see Mr Irons, we would go and find Mrs Khan to see if she could help us. Even though Ms Hemsî had already spoken to her about what had happened, we also knew that she didn't know the whole story because Ms Hemsî hadn't been there. So telling the new boy to follow us, we went and spoke to Mrs Khan.

She listened to us in silence and then, when we were finished, she shook her head. 'Ridiculous,' she muttered, and I think she was talking to herself. 'Some people just can't see past the end of their own noses!' She looked up at us and smiled. 'Not to worry! All of you come with me!'

As we walked to the other side of the school to reach Mr Irons' classroom, I thought about what Mrs Khan had said about noses and their ends. I touched my own nose and squashed it down, because I didn't ever want to have a nose so big that I couldn't see what was happening at the end of it. That was probably what made Mr Irons give detentions to people who didn't deserve it! Michael saw me and asked what I was doing, so I told him. But he said my nose was too small and

flat to ever get in the way of my eyes, so I didn't have anything to worry about.

When we got to Mr Irons' office, Mrs Khan told us to wait outside. We couldn't hear anything except a loud buzzing as if there were two giant bumblebees on the other side of the door. But after a minute, Mr Irons came out and stared down at Michael, the new boy and me with his nose thrust in the air. Maybe he was trying to see if he could see past the end of it better that way.

He gave Josie her football back and didn't say anything else to us, but from that day on, whenever he saw any of us, his eyes would narrow, and his nose would whistle ever so quietly. You don't really need to speak someone else's language to know when they don't like you very much. So even though the new boy couldn't speak many English words then, he knew we had to keep ourselves – and Josie's football – out of the way of Mr Irons, and his horrible whistling nose.



## THE UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE

That weekend, I decided I wanted to ask Mum some more of my eleven questions to see if she knew the answers.

I waited until Sunday morning arrived, because that was when I knew Mum wouldn't be too tired and I could ask her lots of things, instead of just one or two things. The only problem is, I had to be extra, extra patient, because every Sunday morning, my mum spends at least one hour reading the Sunday morning paper. It's not a real Sunday paper because Mum never buys them – she says you can buy a whole meal for the price of a Sunday paper these days. So instead, all through the week, she collects two of the biggest newspapers from the reference section of the

library, and then on Saturday night, she brings them all home and gets them ready for the next day. She opens them out at the centre and puts them in order – so that Monday's papers are on the top and Saturday's papers are on the bottom, and then folds them together like a big book. It's too heavy to hold up and read twelve big newspapers in one go, so Mum always reads it bent over the kitchen table as if she's doing homework.

I don't like disturbing Mum when she's reading the paper because she only gets to do it once a week, so I quickly finished my toast and milk, and silently stared at her as she finished her breakfast. But grown-ups take an awfully long time eating breakfast when they don't have to go to work, and on this morning, Mum seemed to be moving so slowly that you could hardly call it moving at all. I could hear the ticking of the kitchen clock getting louder and louder and my fingers and legs getting bored of waiting.

As soon as Mum took the last bite of her toast, I decided I couldn't wait for her any longer and asked, 'Mum, where's Syria?'

The question made her look up at me straight away.

'What did you say, darling?'

'Just . . . Do you know where Syria is, Mum?' I said, more quietly.

My mum pushed up her glasses and looked at me with her head to one side.

Then she said, 'Syria is a country very far away from here, my love. Why do you want to know?'

I shrugged. 'That's where the new boy in our class is from.'

'Ah,' she said, nodding. 'OK. Tell you what. Why don't you go and get the atlas book and I'll show you?'

I nodded and ran to the living room, trying to remember where I had last put the atlas book. It's hard finding a book in our house because we have so many of them. Mum loves collecting old books and reading them again and again. She takes the copies that are about to be thrown away by her library – so you could say she rescues them. The only problem is, we don't really have space for any more because our rooms are covered with piles of old books. Even the toilet!

The atlas book was big and Mum always kept the very big books on the bottom shelf of our bookcase. So, I climbed over the back of the sofa and crawled down

into the narrow gap head first, to see if it was there. Luckily it was! I grabbed it and pulled it out. The atlas book is one of the oldest books in the house and is almost half as tall as me and just as heavy, so I dragged it along behind me into the kitchen and placed it with a bang onto the kitchen table.

I watched as Mum flipped to the index and then to a page near the middle. 'Here you go,' she said, turning the map around to show me. 'This atlas is a little old, but I don't think the borders have changed that much . . .'

I let my finger meet hers where it said the word 'SYRIA' in capital letters, and looked at the strange shape of the country the new boy had run away from. It looked like a woman yawning and wearing a tiara and whose hair was being blown in the wind. Except she was all pointy.

'Mum?'

'Hm?'

'What fruits do people from Syria like the most?' I crossed my fingers and toes hoping that she would know the answer, because if she did, then I would know the answers to three of my original eleven questions! I

had found out where the new boy was from and what language he spoke – and as a bonus had seen what his country looked like on a map, *and* learned that he was good at football.

‘Well let’s see . . . I don’t really know . . . I guess the same fruits we do. And exotic ones like dates and pomegranates. Your Aunty Selma used to make chicken with pomegranate seeds, remember?’

I shook my head.

‘Ah. Well, it was quite a while ago. It was before your dad . . . had to leave us . . . But I *think* the dish she used to make was a Syrian one. Or was it Lebanese? I can’t remember. But here, you see . . .’ she said, pointing to a country next to Syria which had the word ‘LEBANON’ on it. ‘Lebanon and Syria are right next door to each other, so I guess they must eat the same kind of fruits.’

‘Can we ring and ask her?’

My mum smiled. ‘I can ask her the next time she calls. Remember, she lives here now . . .’ And Mum pointed to a much larger country lying above Syria called ‘TURKEY’. ‘It’s a bit far and it’ll be expensive to call her right now. But listen. We’ll go and see her one

day soon, and when we do, you can ask her and Uncle Turgay all about it in person!’

I nodded but didn’t say anything because I suddenly missed my Aunty Selma an awful lot. It’s funny how you can go for long bits of time without even thinking of someone, and then suddenly feel all wrong because you realise they’re not around any more. I feel like that about my dad sometimes. It feels horrible when I go to bed and realise that I haven’t thought about him all day – not even for a minute. But I always remember him at night before I go to sleep, because that’s when he used to tell me stories and do funny patterns on my forehead so that it tickled. It’s different with my Aunty Selma though, because she’s not my real aunty. So I think it might be OK if I don’t think about her every day.

She’s my mum’s best friend because they like laughing at the same things. She has dimples just like I do, and she always wears lots of sparkling bracelets and necklaces. She used to live two floors below us with Uncle Turgay, and every Sunday night, they would invite Mum and Dad and me down for dinner and give us all sorts of special things to eat – like bread with



spinach inside it and a special kind of tea that came in a small glass and didn't have any milk in it. I remember the tea because Dad let me taste it once, but I didn't like it at all!

But then, after Dad died, Aunty Selma and Uncle Turgay said they were leaving because the Economy was being bad. Grown-ups are always talking about the Economy – especially in shops and at bus stops and on the news. And they always sound angry or sad when they talk about it. I hate the Economy because it made Aunty Selma and Uncle Turgay suddenly disappear – just like Dad. They send us pictures and boxes of sweets sometimes in the post. And even though I like getting things from them because the stamps are interesting, I can tell it makes Mum sad. Now there's an old lady living in their flat and she never speaks to anyone. I don't think Mum could be best friends with her even if she wanted to.

I thought about my question again.

'So, people from Syria like pom-e . . . pom-grain . . .'

'Pom-e-gran-ate,' Mum corrected. 'Remember it like . . . let's see . . . One half of a *pom-pom* and a delicious letter "e" that your *Gran ate!* Pom-e-gran-ate!'

I nodded and said the word out loud three times. I love it when Mum comes up with ways to help me remember how to spell or say a word. Last year I had to learn the word 'conundrum' for a spelling test but kept forgetting how many nuns or 'n's there were in it. And then Mum told me to close my eyes and picture a man called Co and a lonely *nun*, banging on a *drum*. And I've never spelled it wrong since!

I thought about pomegranates and how they might be Ahmet's favourite food and how he might be missing them.

So I asked, 'Mum, can we get one?'

'One what, darling?'

'A pom-e-gran-ate?' I said, carefully.

'Hmmm . . . They're a bit expensive . . . and you can't find them everywhere . . .'

'How expensive?'

'I'm not sure. About one pound fifty I think.'

'What? Nearly two pounds just for one?' I cried out. You could buy a whole packet of colouring pens *and* a rubber for that much money!

Mum laughed. 'Yes, darling. For one. They come a long way to get to our supermarkets. And secondly, a

pomegranate is also a really special fruit. It's like millions of tiny fruit all hidden away inside a small ball, and you can eat it for days.'

'Oh . . .' I said, trying hard to think of what millions of one fruit hidden inside a ball would look like.

She looked at me and then smiled. 'Do you want to see if we can find one? Shall we make that our adventure for today?'

I jumped up and nodded. 'But can we get two?' I asked.

'And why would you need two?'

I think Mum already knew the answer because her lips looked like they were about to smile. I didn't think she'd tell me off, even though pomegranates are so expensive, but you can never be too sure with grown-ups. Sometimes they don't tell you off even when you've done something you know you shouldn't have. And at other times, when you think you haven't done anything that bad at all, they punish you twice as much. Michael says it's so they can keep us on our toes. But I've never stood on my toes when I'm being told off so I don't see how that works.

'I want to get two so that I can give one to the new boy,' I said. 'I've been giving him my sherbet lemons

and sweets after school, but he didn't like them that much. But then I gave him an apple and an orange, and he liked those better. And Ms Hemsî said that he's from Syria and that he only speaks . . . he only speaks . . .' I hesitated, trying to remember what Ms Hemsî had said.

'Arabic?' Mum asked, trying to help.

I shook my head. 'Cur . . . Cur . . . Curt-wish . . .' I guessed, knowing it was wrong.

'Ah. Kurdish . . .'

I nodded.

'I see . . .' I could tell Mum was interested in what I was saying because she had leaned back in her chair and folded her arms

'And I thought maybe he'd like a fruit he used to have at home all the time – before the bullies dropped bombs on everything and made him run away.'

I stopped, worried that Mum would think that it was silly and maybe a waste of money buying food only to give it away. But she didn't. Instead she said, 'I think that's a brilliant idea! Go and get ready, and we'll head out on a pomegranate hunt!'

I got ready so quickly that morning that I think I must have beaten a world record. In five minutes I had

pulled on my adventure jeans and my old Tintin jumper, packed my rucksack with a water bottle, an apple and a banana, put on my wellies, brushed my hair AND emptied my piggy bank. I had exactly four pounds and twenty pence saved up, so I took three pounds, hoping that, just like my astronaut stationery set, I could find two pomegranates that were on sale.

First, we went to the fruit stall that was at the bottom of our high street. It's run by a man and a woman called Mr and Mrs Marbles who like to shout 'Only a paaaaan! Fruit and veg, only a paaaaaan' to all the people that walk by. Their faces are always red and smiling, and they wear giant square-shaped green belts around their waist, which look empty but jingle loudly when they walk.

Mrs Marbles helps people pick out the fruit they want, and Mr Marbles puts them in a bag. We always buy our fruit and vegetables from them and I've never known them not to have anything we need. But when we asked them if they had a pomegranate, they both shook their heads at us and told us to try the supermarket.

So, we walked up and over the hill to the

supermarket. They had a fruit section that was as long as our house, but Mum couldn't see a pomegranate anywhere. We went over to a man who was stacking carrots and humming to himself and asked him if they had any pomegranates in store. He walked us over to a small box, but it was empty.

'Sorry, love, looks like we've run out. You might want to try the bigger supermarket on the other side of town.'

'Ah. OK. Thank you.' Mum looked down at me and sighed. Then she said, 'Come on! The adventure continues!'

We hopped onto a bus and after half an hour, landed at an even *bigger* supermarket. This one had a car park as big as a football field and corridors as long as the ones in school! But we still couldn't find a pomegranate anywhere.

'Let's ask someone!' said Mum. 'They must have them ...'

We walked around and found a man dressed in a suit who was standing by the sandwich section. He had a label on his jacket that said, 'Frank Smith, Floor Manager'. I didn't know what a Floor Manager was,

but I guessed he had to make sure the floor was clean and help anyone who fell down get back up again. But Mr Smith didn't look like the kind of person who would help anyone get up from a floor. He had lips that went downwards as if they'd never smiled, and his hair looked wet as if a large bottle of oil had fallen on top of it. He was staring at a clipboard and muttering angrily to himself.

'Excuse me . . . Frank, is it? Hi,' said Mum, smiling.

The man gave my mum a cold nod before continuing to fill in a long form.

'We're looking for some pomegranates but can't seem to find any,' said Mum, smiling even more.

'We don't sell them here,' said Frank, still looking at his clipboard.

'Oh really? Any idea where we could find some?' continued Mum.

'No.'

My mum looked at him for a few seconds and then said, in her warmest voice, 'Thank you. You've really outdone yourself in helping us today. Have a wonderful day!' And grabbing my hand, she walked away.

'Mum, why were you so nice to him?' I asked. 'He

was horrible! He didn't try and help us even a little bit!'

'Because you should never be horrible to someone who's being horrible to you,' said Mum. 'Otherwise they win by making you just as bad as them. Now, come on. Let's get back on the bus! There's another place I know we can try.'

By this time, I was getting hungry, so while we were waiting for the next bus, I ate my banana.

'Hmmm . . .' said my mum, looking at her watch. It was nearly two o'clock and there were some dark grey clouds gathering in the sky. 'I'm afraid the next stop will have to be our last one, darling. It looks like it's going to start raining in a bit.'

A few seconds later, a very full bus pulled up in front of us and we squeezed on. I clung to Mum's coat because there weren't any empty seats and waited for our stop. I was worried, because if this was our last try, then I had just one chance left to find a pomegranate – so I crossed my fingers and my toes, and made a wish that we would.

The next place felt like an awfully long way away, and when we finally got there, it was filled with so many

people that we could hardly walk properly. There were lots and lots of market stalls lying in the middle of a big road, all selling fish and meat and bedsheets and long gold chains. There was a man with a microphone who was trying to sell perfumes like a gameshow host by shouting, 'Roll up! Roll up!' And next to him was a woman shouting, 'Peter never picked potatoes as good as these before! Buy 'em now before they go!' I wondered who Peter was and how much money he made picking potatoes, but then I could smell onions and burgers being cooked somewhere which made my tummy rumble. I love burgers – especially ones that have lots of fried onions and ketchup in them. But I wanted to save my money for the pomegranates, so I scrunched up my nose and tried not to smell anything at all.

We visited every stall in the market, from the beginning of the street right to the end, but even though we looked as carefully as we could, we couldn't find a single pomegranate anywhere. My mum had told me to look for a pinkish ball that looked like a very hard apple and which had a small crown on the top. But I couldn't see anything that looked even a little bit royal.

'Try the store up by the station,' suggested one of the stall owners when Mum asked her for help. 'They have everything under the sun in there. They should have some.'

'Thank you,' said Mum. She grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze because she could tell I was starting to give up hope. 'Nearly there,' she whispered. 'I can feel it.'

We walked for five minutes down the road and up to the station and found the shop the woman in the market had told us about. It was much smaller than the big supermarket with Frank the horrible Floor Manager in it, but it was bright with lots of coloured lights and bowls and bowls of fruit and vegetables outside. It had everything you could think of – peaches and plums, mangoes and bananas, kiwis and pears, yellow apples and red apples and pink apples and even a spiky pink and green fruit that I had never seen before. But we couldn't see any pomegranates, so we went inside and Mum asked the man standing behind the counter.

'Ah!' nodded the man, scratching the tip of his nose. 'Pomegranate! I see for you . . .' And talking out loud to himself, he hurried to a corner of the shop and quickly looked through some boxes.

'Much, much regret!' he called out, holding up an empty box. 'No more. But we have delivery on Tuesday!'

The man came back and looked at us and we looked at him. He had a large white beard, a moustache that was curly at the ends, and was wearing a bright red turban. I liked him because his eyebrows were like hairy caterpillars and they jumped up and down a lot when he spoke.

'Oh well,' said Mum. 'We tried, at least.'

The man looked at me. I think he must have noticed that I was looking sad, because he said, 'It is for little one?'

I looked up and nodded. 'And for my friend,' I said. 'He's new in my class and misses home and that's what he used to have.'

'I see,' he said, looking at me with a smile. Then he frowned as if he had just thought of something, and suddenly pointing his finger at the ceiling and crying out, 'A-HA!', he ran to a small door at the back of the shop and disappeared.

Mum and I looked at each other in surprise.

'He's funny,' I said. 'I like him.'

'He seems lovely,' agreed Mum.

After a few seconds, the man came back, but instead of returning to the counter, he came and stood in front of us.

'They are not perfect, but will be OK,' he said. And whipping his hands out from behind his back, he held up two little pink balls that each had a crown on top.

'Oh!' cried out Mum, clapping her hands. 'You have some!'

'They are little old – my wife, she says they are not perfect one hundred per cent, so we don't sell you see?' said the man, his eyebrows jumping up and down even more. 'My wife – she knows everything about fruit, so I listen to her most!'

'They're perfect enough for us!' laughed Mum. 'Aren't they, darling?'

I nodded as the man gently handed them to me.

'You and friend enjoy please,' he whispered, and tapped me on the nose with a finger that had a golden ring with a large red stone on it.

I looked down at the pomegranates. They were the size of grapefruits and had a hard peachy-pink and brown skin that was as smooth and as shiny as polished glass. And both of them had a tiny flower on the top

made up of exactly seven stiff brown petals. They were the best, most interesting things I had ever seen.

Mum took out her purse because that's where I had put my pocket money, but the man shook his head and waved his hand.

'No, no. You must not! It is gift for little one!'

'Oh! No - you *must* let me—'

But the man held up his hands which made Mum go quiet and then put a hand on his chest. 'It is gift. They are not excellent. Not new. So very poor gift.'

'They're the BEST gifts,' said Mum. 'Aren't they, darling?'

I nodded, feeling so happy that I wanted to hug the man and Mum and jump up and down all at once.

'Thank you, Sir,' I said, giving the man an enormous smile.

'Welcome, welcome,' he said. And, smiling back, he gave me a pat on the top of my head and waved at us as we left the shop.

'What a wonderful man,' said Mum, as she helped me put the pomegranates in my rucksack.

'He looked like a king,' I said, thinking of the ring with the stone in it and his red turban.

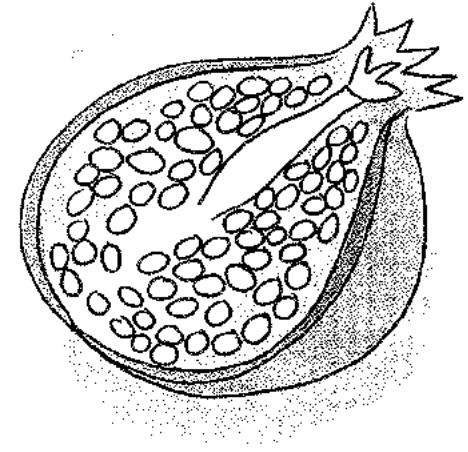
Mum laughed. 'He certainly has the heart of one! Maybe he is one! You never can tell with people! Now. Seeing as our Unexpected Adventure is at an end, let's hurry home before it starts to pour!'

I looked up. Everything had suddenly turned dark and the sky was filled with large grey clouds that were so low you could hear them rumbling. But I didn't care, because I had two of the best presents I could ever have in my bag, given to me by a man with the heart of a king.



## THE BIG FIGHT

The next morning, I told Josie, Michael and Tom about the Unexpected Adventure my mum had taken me on, and they all said they wanted to come with me next time and meet the man in the red turban with the king's heart too. None of them had ever seen the inside of a pomegranate before, so I tried to describe the colour and shapes of the seeds to them on the bus to school. But they still looked confused, so I drew them this picture on the back of my exercise book instead:



I think pomegranates are now my most favourite fruit in the whole wide world. Not just because of the way they taste, but because of how they look. On the outside they look like extra-shiny balls that have been dipped into a bucket of sunset colours, like peach and pink and gold. But the inside is even cooler, because when you pull one open, it's like finding a million sparkling red rubies all squashed together inside a round suitcase and bursting to get out.

'You have to push each one out gently,' Mum had said, when she had cut mine open and shown me how to pop the seeds out. 'See? As if you're plucking out jewels from the roof of a cave!' She showed me how to peel off



the skin lying between the seeds too – but I didn't like that part so much because the peelings looked like bits of old snake-skin that I'd seen in a zoo once.

I meant to give the pomegranate to the new boy at home-time, but I was so excited that I couldn't wait until then. So as soon as the bell for first break began to ring, I hid the pomegranate under my school jumper and hurried out into the playground with it. We're not allowed to take food into the playground because we're only supposed to eat snacks in the dinner hall. But I wasn't going to eat it or make anyone else eat it, so I didn't think it counted.

The new boy followed us out because he knew we were his friends now. He had stopped disappearing every break-time and only went to have his Seclusion during lunch-times. Even Ms Hemi had stopped coming out during first breaks and went to the staff room, which I think meant she knew we were the new boy's friends too.

'Here!' I said as soon we got into our corner of the playground. And pulling the pomegranate out from under my jumper, I held it out to him. 'It's for you!'

Josie and Michael looked at each other and Tom

looked at me, as we all waited for the new boy to say something. But he just stared and stared – first at us and then the pomegranate – and didn't say or do anything.

'Knew you should have put a sticker on it!' whispered Tom, shaking his head.

Then, slowly, the new boy reached out and took the pomegranate in his hands.

'Home,' he said quietly, his lion eyes getting very big. 'I . . . have . . . home . . .'

'Yes!' I said. 'Your home in Syria! I've seen it. On a map. You know, MAP?'

The new boy fell quiet. And then, for the first time since we had met him, he smiled. Not a small smile, or a side-smile or even a half-smile, but a real, proper smile that went from one cheek to the other, and which made his eyes smile too. He opened his mouth to say something when, suddenly, Brendan-the-Bully pushed past us.

'Gimme that!' he said, and he snatched the pomegranate from Ahmet's hands.

'Give that BACK!' I shouted, feeling scared and angry all at once.

'Make me!' sneered Brendan-the-Bully as he turned around to face me.

I don't know why, but sometimes, when someone you don't like looks at you right in the eyes, they suddenly seem to grow taller and you suddenly seem to grow shorter – even when, really, you're both the same size. Usually it's only for a few seconds and then you grow back to your normal height again. But sometimes it goes on for so long that you wonder if you'll ever get back to the height you used to be.

This was one of those times. When Brendan-the-Bully turned to look at me, he stared into my eyes so hard and for so long that he seemed to grow by at least two more inches. But I was feeling so hot and angry that I could feel my ears going red and I didn't care. I took a step forward and tried to grab the pomegranate back.

'Go on! Try again!' laughed Brendan-the-Bully, as he whipped it away and held it high above his head. I could feel my face getting redder and redder and my legs getting shorter and shorter as I tried to jump and snatch it back from him. Then suddenly, he threw the pomegranate to Chris, who was standing behind me. Chris caught it and tossed it up and down in one hand, waiting for one of us to try and do something. Josie and

Tom and Michael all lunged forward but Chris was too quick, and threw the pomegranate to Liam, who quickly threw it back to Brendan-the-Bully.

This might have carried on all break-time, because Brendan-the-Bully likes playing this game and no one has ever beaten him at it. But then what happened next was so unexpected, so shocking and so fantastic that even Brendan-the-Bully didn't know what to do!

Because suddenly, with a huge roar, Ahmet ran straight at Brendan-the-Bully, and like an angry lion, crashed into him with his head! Brendan-the-Bully fell backwards and onto the floor, his legs swinging up into the air. We all gasped out loud, but Ahmet didn't stop there.

He jumped on top, with his face red and patchy, and punched Brendan-the-Bully as many times as he could, shouting something that none of us could understand. Someone behind us cried out 'FIIIIIGHT!' and everyone in the playground ran over to watch. But – and this was the most shocking thing of all! – it wasn't really a fight. You need two people – at least – to be fighting for it to be a fight. And Brendan-the-Bully WASN'T FIGHTING BACK! Not at all! Not even for a second! Instead he was holding his arms over his face

as Ahmet continued punching and roaring and shouting at him with all his might.

'BREAK IT UP NOW!' shouted a voice as the crowd parted, and Mr Irons and Mrs Sanders came running through.

But Ahmet wouldn't stop. He was like a machine that didn't have an off-button and he continued to punch and punch and punch just as hard and as fast as he could.

'RIGHT, YOUNG MAN!' cried Mr Irons. And, grabbing him by the back of his jumper, Mr Irons lifted Ahmet up off Brendan-the-Bully, whilst Mrs Sanders pulled Brendan-the-Bully back onto his feet.

Everyone fell quiet, but I don't know if that was because we were all wondering what was going to happen next, or because none of us could believe that Brendan-the-Bully had actually been hurt. His face was bright red and his eyes looked watery, and there were tiny stones from the playground floor stuck to the sides of his cheeks.

With a horrible glint in his eye, Mr Irons stared down at Ahmet and shouted, 'WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, BOY? EH? EH?'

Ahmet stared angrily at the floor and didn't say anything.

'WHO STARTED THIS?' shouted out Mrs Sanders, who was so angry that she had forgotten to look over her glasses and was looking at everyone straight through them instead.

I immediately pointed to Brendan-the-Bully, and so did Tom and Josie and Michael.

'RIGHT! ALL OF YOU! WITH ME! NOW!' ordered Mrs Sanders, dragging Brendan-the-Bully by the arm across the playground and into the school.

Mr Irons flicked his hand and pointed to the doors, his nose whistling louder than it had ever whistled before. I followed Tom and Josie and Michael as we all hung our heads and made our way through the crowds. Everyone stared at us, and then stared at Ahmet. His face was even redder than mine and his lion eyes were so big and wet it looked as if they were drowning. He wiped away an angry tear and looked back over his shoulder. I looked back too and saw lots of bright pink spots all over the ground.

The pomegranate had smashed open, and all its ruby red seeds had been crushed beneath everyone's feet.

After we told Mrs Sanders all about what had happened, she gave me fifty lines to do for taking the pomegranate out into the playground, and said that Ahmet and Brendan-the-Bully had to write lines every night for the rest of the week with Mr Irons. We tried to tell her and Mrs Khan that the fight wasn't Ahmet's fault and that sometimes, hitting someone when they're being horrible and taking something that's yours away from you, can make you feel a hundred times better than just telling a teacher ever would. Even a million times better! But they just shook their heads and said that Ahmet should never have hit Brendan-the-Bully. We didn't say anything after that because sometimes you can tell when grown-ups won't listen to you any more. Usually they say, 'That's an end of it' or 'I've said my peas' or 'That's that'. But teachers always say, 'That's all. You can leave now.'

As we left, I told Ahmet that I was sorry for getting him into trouble and that I would try and find another pomegranate for him. All he did was give me a nod and a thumbs-up. I think it was his way of telling me not to worry and that being able to roar like a lion on top of a bully was worth doing lines for. Even if it was hundreds of them, in a language he didn't know how to speak yet.

As we all went home that afternoon, we talked about the Big Fight, and how Ahmet was going to be famous because he was the first boy ever to have beaten up Brendan-the-Bully.

'You wait and see,' said Tom. 'Everyone's going to want to be his friend now! Even the cool kids!'

I guessed Tom was right, but it made me feel sad. If Ahmet made friends with the cool kids, that meant he wouldn't talk to us or play football with us any more. There's a law that says cool kids can only ever hang out with other cool kids, and that they mustn't ever talk to us – except for when they're put in a group with us by a teacher. I don't know who wrote the law, but Michael knows all about it. I guess his mum must have told him.

But it turned out Michael was wrong about the law. Because Ahmet never stopped being our friend. Not even after he became the most popular boy in school for beating up Brendan-the-Bully.

And not even when all the newspapers in the world made him the Most Famous Refugee Boy on the planet.

## WAR AND MISSING PIECES

On the day after the Big Fight, just as Tom had guessed, Ahmet became famous. In the playground, wherever he went, people pointed and gasped and called him 'The Boy Who Beat Brendan-the-Bully', and they asked him lots of questions like, 'Is it true you can do a hundred punches in under a minute?' and 'What were you REALLY fighting over – was it your parents' ransom money?' and 'When are you gonna fight again? Can we come and watch?'

After a while, Ms Hemsli began to tell everyone to leave Ahmet alone, so everyone started asking Michael and Josie and Tom and me their questions instead. I didn't say much and neither did Michael. But Josie and Tom got so excited that they started to add new

bits to the story, so that by the end of the week, most of the school believed Ahmet hadn't just beaten up Brendan-the-Bully, but had fought Chris and Liam too, over a suitcase full of red diamonds – and a pink basketball.

All of this made Brendan-the-Bully scowl more than ever. But even though he stared at us all the time and Chris and Liam showed us their fists whenever they saw us, they didn't chase us around the playground, or steal Josie's football, or smash into us when we were carrying our lunch trays like we thought they would.

'I bet he's scared of us now that we've got Ahmet,' grinned Tom.

'Yeah!' said Josie. 'He's a proper scaredy-cat now!'

But Michael said he didn't like it one little bit, and that he bet Brendan-the-Bully was up to something. At first, I didn't believe him, but then lots of strange things began to happen to Ahmet.

The first thing happened just two days after the Big Fight. We had all been decorating a new pot for our photosynthesis plants, and Mrs Khan had given Ahmet a golden star because his plant had grown faster than anyone else's. I think that was because every morning,

before Mrs Khan called the register, he would water it and talk to it for one whole minute. I didn't know that plants could speak different languages, but when I asked Mrs Khan about it, she said plants could speak every language under the sun, and that the more languages they heard, the faster they grew.

Ahmet was really proud of his golden star, and he got a silver one too for decorating his pot with pictures of sea shells and whales and fish. But when we got back from last break that afternoon, his pot was lying broken on the floor and his plant had been stamped on. Someone must have smashed it on purpose because nobody else's plant pots were hurt at all. Mrs Khan said that if the person who did it didn't put their hand up right away, they would be in Big Trouble. But nobody did put their hands up, so The Mystery of the Murdered Plant Pot stayed a mystery.

Then, almost exactly a week after The Mystery of the Murdered Plant Pot, came The Day of the Deathly Worm Tray. After assembly one morning, Mrs Khan told us all to get our workbooks from our class trays. But when Ahmet pulled his open, he found it bursting with a whole pile of large, fat, wriggling worms! He

cried out and dropped the tray on the floor so that all the worms went flying out across the room. That made Dean – who sits on the table behind me – be sick all over his table. Dean is scared of anything that doesn't have any legs on it – even snails. But he hates worms the worst.

Mr Whittaker, the school cleaner, had to come and clean it all up, and Mrs Khan and Ms Hemsy were very angry and checked all our trays. But no one else had a single worm in their tray – not even Tony-the-Nose-Picker, who likes to collect all kinds of strange things in his tray. Mrs Khan told the person who had done it to put their hand up again – and this time she looked at Brendan-the-Bully as if she wasn't really speaking to any of us and only to him. But again, nobody put their hand up. So, Mrs Khan shook her head and said she was going to make sure that whoever it was would be caught soon and punished not just by her, but Mrs Sanders too.

And then, after that, came the worst trick of all – the one that everyone in school later called The Great Baked Beans Bag Trap.

Every morning, right before Mrs Khan takes the register, everyone has to put their school bag on their

own special hook at the back of the class, and we're only allowed to take our P.E. kit or homework or lunch boxes out when we're told to. Everyone knows whose bag is where, because everyone's hook has their name on top. Just days after The Day of the Deathly Worm Tray, Mrs Khan told us to get up and collect our P.E. kits from our bags, just like she always did on Wednesdays. But when Ahmet went to get his P.E. kit and unzipped his rucksack, a lumpy river of baked beans burst out and splodged and splashed all over him! Everyone cried out 'Eeeeecewwwwww!' and then instantly fell silent. Mrs Khan was so angry when no one put their hand up again that she cancelled P.E. and Mrs Sanders came and told the whole class off. It was horrible – especially because Ahmet started to cry when he saw what had happened to his P.E. kit and his bag.

I think everyone knew it was Brendan-the-Bully who had done all these things, but no one could prove it. Not even Mrs Khan. After that day, the door to the classroom was locked every break-time and at lunch-time, which stopped anything else from happening to Ahmet's things. But I wanted more than anything for

Brendan-the-Bully to be caught and to prove he was a Criminal, so Michael bought his grandad's magnifying glass in and we all searched for clues. But we couldn't find a single one! Not even in the school bins.

Ahmet was more upset about The Great Baked Beans Bag Trap than any of the other things that had happened. And even though Ms Hemsî washed his rucksack with lots of washing-up liquid, it looked even worse than before and smelled strange too. But Ahmet still brought it into school every day. I wanted to know why he didn't get a new one, or why Ms Hemsî kept saying that it looked fine when it didn't. And then, just two days after The Great Baked Beans Bag Trap, I found out.

We had all put away our books and were getting ready for group story time just like we always did on Fridays, when Mrs Khan made a surprise announcement.

'Now, everyone!' she said. 'This is our last afternoon before we all break up for the half-term holidays, and I thought we could do with a treat! Instead of us all reading a story together, we're going to listen to one instead. And it's a very important story, because it's going to be told to us by someone

very special in our class.' Looking over at Ahmet and Ms Hemsî, she waved them over to where she was standing. I didn't know it just then, but I was about to have nearly ALL of my original eleven questions answered in one go!

We all turned around to watch as Ms Hemsî picked up a large pile of papers from the table and followed Ahmet to the front of the class.

'I want everyone to listen extra carefully, and I don't want anyone asking any questions until after Ahmet has finished telling his story. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Mrs Khaaaaaan,' shouted the class.

'Good!' And leaning against her desk, Mrs Khan smiled and said, 'Ahmet . . .?'

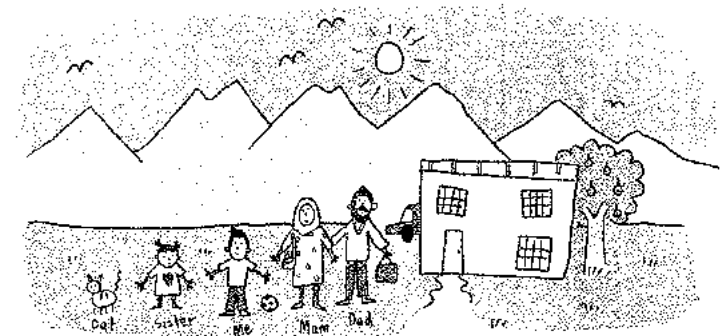
Everyone shuffled in their chairs and sat up straight, waiting for Ahmet to speak. I wondered if he would tell the story in English or in Kurdish, but I was so excited I didn't really care.

'Hello. My name is Ahmet. I am nine . . . years old. And I am refugee. I come from Syria.'

As he said this, he pointed to Ms Hemsî, who held up a drawing showing a house and a tree and a car in front of some mountains. And in the front of the car

were four people, labelled, 'Me', 'Mum', 'Dad' and 'Sister' – and a cat.

This was the drawing:



I was surprised because I had never thought about Ahmet having a brother or a sister. I thought he was like me and didn't have any. His sister wasn't at our school. In the picture, she looked smaller than him, so maybe she was in nursery.

'But in Syria, there is big war,' said Ahmet, and he pointed to Ms Hemsî again, who held up another picture. This one showed buildings on fire and bombs dropping from a plane and lots of people lying on the ground and other people holding guns.

It looked like this:





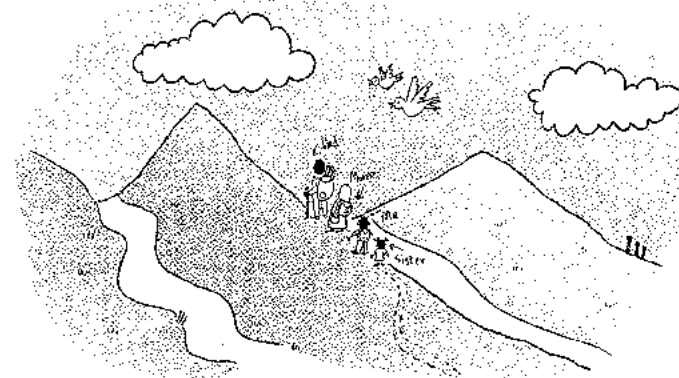
Josie stopped chewing her hair and looked at me and then looked back at the drawing again. And from behind, I heard someone whisper, 'Woah! He's seen a real bomb AND a real gun!'

'Because of war, my family . . . run away,' said Ahmet, as his lion eyes became big and round and watery. 'We went . . . on mountain and rivers . . . and carry bags and cat.'

This time, Ms Hemsı held up a picture showing a family crossing mountains and rivers, and in the sky, birds that were crying. In the picture, Ahmet had drawn himself carrying a red rucksack with a black stripe on it, just like the one he had now. That was when I knew why he loved it so much, and why he cried when it had been filled with Brendan-the-Bully's horrible baked

beans. He had carried it all the way from his house and over a mountain, which meant it was lots more important and lots more special than any of our bags.

This was the picture:

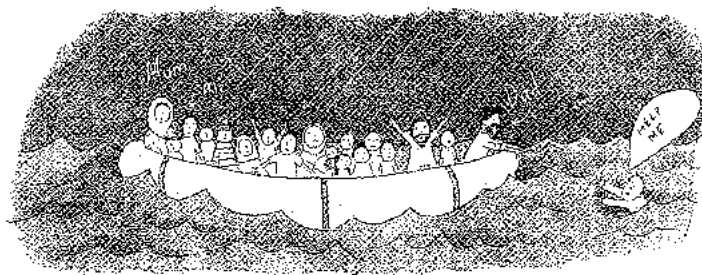


'Then nowhere safe, so we get on boat on big sea.'

This time, Ms Hemsı held up a drawing of a boat. But the boat wasn't like a normal boat with sails and pointy ends and wooden sides. This one was flat and round and was orange on the sides – just like the ones I had seen on the news that didn't have any toilets on them. And inside the boat were lots of people, all wearing vests that made them look like puffin birds. But there were people in the water too, and they had bubbles coming out of their mouths saying, 'HELP ME'.

Everyone leaned forward in their chairs and tried to read the labels Ahmet had put over some of the people's heads. I saw 'Me' and 'Mum' and 'Dad', but there wasn't one for 'Sister' or 'Cat'. I know cats don't like water because Josie has a cat and she says it screams whenever it rains and always wants to stay inside. So maybe Ahmet's cat didn't want to get into the boat. And maybe his sister didn't want to leave it behind, so she stayed behind to look after it.

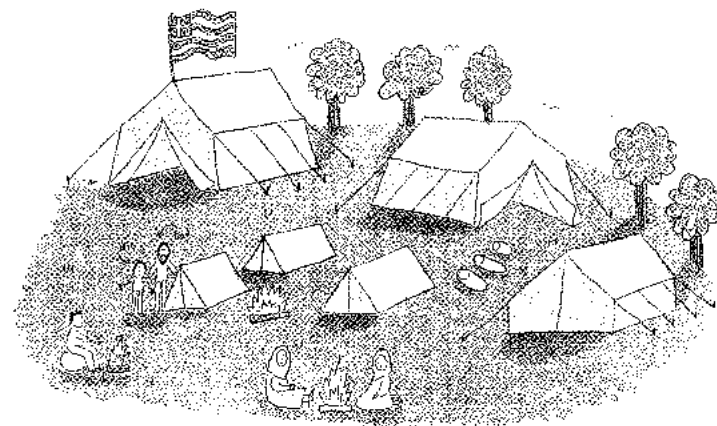
This was the boat picture:



'Then we are in another country, called Greece,' said Ahmet. 'We live in tent with lots of people who run away like me. They come from lots of country like Afghanistan and Pakistan and Eritrea.'

The next picture showed a flag with blue and white stripes and a white cross in a blue corner, and next to it were lots of tents and people everywhere sitting next to fires and sleeping on the floor. In this picture, only the words 'Me' and 'Dad' could be seen. Ahmet's mum must be sleeping inside one of the tents.

This was the picture:



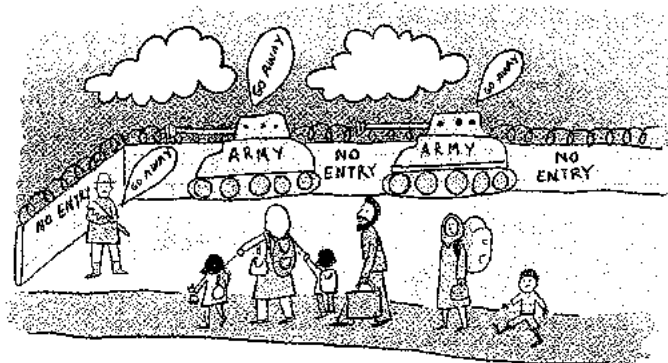
'Then we walk long time . . . In lots of country. It was cold, and we sleep on floor. And then we stay in France.'

This time, Ahmet pointed to the next picture with his finger and showed us the railway tracks he had

drawn. On it were people carrying suitcases and children, and all of them were walking to a wall with barbed wire on the top. Everyone looked sad. And in the corner, there were army tanks and soldiers holding guns, and all the guns were pointing at the people with the suitcases and children.

Ms Hemi held this drawing up for longer than any of the others, because Ahmet was looking at it and didn't seem to want to stop staring at it.

This was the drawing:



'Then I come here . . . and come to school. I like here . . . no bombs. It safe and I like new friends and teacher and play football.'

Ahmet stood and stared at everyone, and everyone stared back. Mrs Khan blew her nose loudly, and Ms Hemi put the drawings down and gave Ahmet a hug.

'Thank you, Ahmet,' said Mrs Khan, standing up and putting a hand on his shoulder. 'Everyone, let's give Ahmet a huge round of applause for being so brave and for sharing his story with us.'

We all clapped, but we didn't clap as loud as we usually do for stories, because I think we were feeling strange. I don't think any of us had ever heard a story like it before. And as sad and as scary as it was, it was even sadder and scarier because it wasn't just a made-up story from one of our reading books. It was all real. Ahmet had survived everything his pictures had shown us and was here. With us. Knowing that made me feel sorry and proud and scared for him all at once; but most of all, it made me want to tell him he was definitely the bravest person I knew.

'Now, as you have seen, Ahmet's story is very special, and I'm sure you have lots of questions you want to ask him,' said Mrs Khan. Everyone's hands immediately shot up into the air – but I think mine was first.

'That's wonderful!' smiled Mrs Khan, as she signalled at us to put our hands back down. 'But as Ahmet is still learning his English words, we're only going to ask him three questions. I want you all to write down just one question for him on a piece of paper.' Mrs Khan walked around and gave us each a thin slip of blank paper. 'And when you're done, Ms Hemsî is going to pick out three questions we can ask him. You have a few minutes to think of your question and to write it out in your very best handwriting. Try to get all your spellings right, and remember, just *one* question each.'

The entire class fell quiet as everyone grabbed their pencils, put their heads down and wrote out their questions. I had lots of questions that I wanted to ask, but I picked the one that was most new and wrote that one out. After a few minutes, Mrs Khan said our time was up, and Ms Hemsî collected all the bits of paper.

Everyone began to whisper to one another as Mrs Khan and Ms Hemsî looked through our questions and either shook their heads or nodded.

'What did you ask?' whispered Tom, turning around.

'I asked why he didn't stay in Greece, because the weather's warmer there and they have more seaside places,' whispered back Josie.

'Oh. I asked how fast he had to run to get away from the bombs,' whispered Tom.

'Michael, what did you ask?' whispered Josie, leaning forward and poking Michael on the shoulder.

'I asked if it was scary to be in the boat and if he was on it at night-time,' said Michael.

'That's two questions!' whispered Josie, shaking her head. Then she looked at me. 'What did you ask?'

'I asked what happened to his cat and what his sister's name is,' I answered.

'Oh!' said Tom. 'But that's two questions as well!'

'Right, everyone!' said Mrs Khan, clapping her hands so that we all stopped whispering and looked to the front of the class. 'We have some excellent questions here, but we've chosen three. I'm going to say them in English, and then Ms Hemsî is going to translate both the question and answer for us. Right . . . the first question is: what did your mum and dad do in Syria?'

Ms Hemsî spoke to Ahmet in Kurdish and he said something back. Ms Hemsî nodded and then looking at

us, said, 'Ahmet's father was a teacher. And his mother wrote for a newspaper.'

Everyone in class nodded and we waited for Mrs Khan to read out the next question. I crossed my fingers extra-tight in the hopes that it would be mine.

'The next question is: what did you like doing most before the war happened?'

We waited for Ms Hemsî to tell Ahmet what the question was and then reply. 'He liked to play football with his friends,' answered Ms Hemsî. 'And going to the park with his grandfather and eating kibbeh.' She smiled at Ahmet, and before any of us could ask what a 'kibbeh' was, explained, 'A kibbeh is a very special snack which is filled with minced meat in the middle and is covered with lots of delicious spices. It's very famous in Syria and it looks like . . .'

Ms Hemsî went over to the blackboard and quickly drew a shape. It looked like a small American football.

'Is that the right shape, Ahmet?' she asked.

Ahmet nodded. We all looked at each other and tried to imagine what an American football with minced meat in the middle might taste like.

As Mrs Khan held up the last slip of paper, I decided

to cross both my toes and fingers. But it didn't work, because then she said, 'And the last question is: do you still sleep in a tent or do you sleep in a house now?'

When Ahmet heard this question from Ms Hemsî, he shook his head and said something.

'No, he sleeps in a house now,' said Ms Hemsî. 'And he is happy because there is a toilet in it and hot water and food.'

As we all nodded to each other, Mrs Khan put her arm around Ahmet and said, 'Let's give Ahmet another round of applause, shall we?'

This time, nearly everyone clapped much louder than before and Michael even cried out, 'Wooooohooooo!' as Ahmet and Ms Hemsî went and sat back down. But I could see Brendan-the-Bully mouthing 'Booooo!' and making a face as if something smelled, and Liam giving a double thumbs-down. I looked back at Mrs Khan and Ms Hemsî hoping they had seen too, but they were busy looking at Ahmet.

'Right! Now everyone, before we leave today, I want you all to listen to me very carefully.' Mrs Khan clapped her hands once and waited for everyone to settle back down. 'As I said, you all had some fantastic questions for

Ahmet, and I'm very proud of you for thinking up such interesting and thoughtful ones too. But . . .' And here she looked at us with her eyebrows raised, which meant she was being extra-serious and would be extra-angry if we didn't listen to her. 'I'm sure I don't have to tell you that running away from a war and leaving your home is a very hard thing to do. And it's especially hard when you have to try and put all the missing pieces of your life back together again, in a place that's new and strange to you.'

Then Mrs Khan quickly glanced at me and Josie and Michael and Tom and said, 'I know that some of you miss Ahmet when he's not allowed to go out and play. And I know you all have lots of questions for him. But it's very important that he talks to people who know what he's been through, and who can help him feel better. And it's even *more* important that they can ask him the kinds of questions you all want to ask him, in a safe and secluded space *first*, before he's ready to speak to other people more. OK?'

Josie looked over at me and I looked over at her and Tom and Michael looked over their shoulders at us. So *that* was what the Seclusion was for! It was so that Ahmet could talk to people!

'So,' continued Mrs Khan. 'I want you all to promise me that you won't ask Ahmet any more questions about the war – or about his family – without asking me or Ms Hemsî first. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Mrs Khaaaaaan . . .' said the class, as the bell for home-time began to ring.

'Good! Now, row one, put away your things and off you go. Make sure you all have everything you need for your homework assignments for the half-term, and I'll see you in a week's time!'

As we waited for our row to be called out, I looked over my shoulder at Ahmet and wondered what pieces he was still missing before he could put his life back together again. It was like a jigsaw, I thought. I hate doing jigsaws – even the easy ones, because I always get bored halfway through, and I couldn't imagine trying to do one that had pieces missing.

I sure hoped that when he was running away from all the bullies and the bombs, Ahmet hadn't lost any of the important pieces on the way. And that, if he had, someone was helping him find new ones that were exactly the right shape and colours that he needed.