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Opening extract from

Red Leaves

Written by

Sita Brahmachari

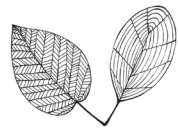
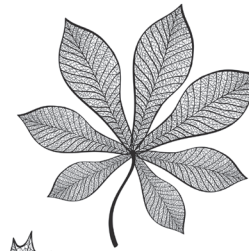
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Chapter One

'Here I go, up, up above the elder trees to my bird's-eye view. Leaves flying everywhere, red leaves full of passion and anger and sadness. Time to light the fires. The year's turning and the wood's stirring. Time to unravel the vine back through time.' Elder, the ancient homeless woman shook a branch and a shower of leaves rained down. She laughed and threw her arms around wildly as if stirring up a storm.



Aisha placed her key in the lock.

'Sure you can't come back to mine? Mum's cooking,' Muna asked as she leaned on the garden wall.

'Not today. Liliana wants me home. She says there's something she has to talk to me about.'

The girls switched to speaking in Somali, chatted for a while and parted with a giggle.

Liliana winced as the door clicked closed.

'Hi,' Aisha called to her breezily and walked straight through to her bedroom.

'Hi love!' Liliana sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by sketching pencils, paper, scissors, glue and a collection of half-drunk cups of coffee. Her hands shook slightly as she smoothed another photo into her foster daughter's scrapbook. *Be rational, be calm, it's only a first meeting*, Liliana comforted herself, but there was nothing rational about the way she felt for Aisha. She set aside the glue and began drawing a detailed pattern of musical notes around the border of the page, stalling again. Perhaps she *should* have let Aisha's social worker give her this news.

Liliana imagined that she was standing with Aisha on a seafront on a cloudless day; Aisha and everyone around looked happy and settled while she alone gaped in horror as a giant wave threatened to engulf them. *It's natural to feel like this,* Liliana consoled herself, for she had been bonded to Aisha since the very first day when the little girl with the saddest eyes in the world had tiptoed through her front door, peering in as if she feared that the flat might explode at any moment.

Liliana clasped her hands together to still them.

'Aisha, come and see! I've added some new photos of you and Muna with your band.'

'What band?' Aisha laughed, stepping into the

kitchen and peering over Liliana's shoulder. 'Singing together once at school doesn't exactly make us into a group!'

'Well, you should be. You were by far the best.'

'You *would* say that!'

'Because it's true!' Liliana shrugged, and smiled to herself as she turned the pages of Aisha's life story book – Liliana had taken to calling it a 'story book' and sometimes 'a scrapbook', because somehow these names seemed less daunting. Every child she had cared for had one. It was a personal history in words and pictures, made so that they, and future carers, could chart their life's journey, record progress and give the children a joined-up sense of their own history.

Some foster-carers she knew didn't bother too much with them, but Liliana always felt that making sure these little details were filled in was the very least that she could do for the children she welcomed into her home.

Aisha's earliest drawings in the book were from the time when she had refused to speak. There was one of Aisha as a baby curled up in a foetal position inside a giant image of her mother. That always choked Liliana up the most. When she had first seen it she'd cried. Who could blame the child for wanting to crawl back inside her mother and be born all over again? Aisha's 'life story' already looked too long and complicated. It

was hard to believe that she was not yet even thirteen.

Aisha's description of leaving Somalia and travelling to Britain had broken Liliana's heart. At just ten years old she had managed to convince the authorities that she was twelve. Liliana would never forget the day that the little girl had finally confided in her.

'"It will go better for you if you pretend you are a few years older." That's what the guide said to me.'

'And how did you pretend to be older?' Liliana asked.

'Like this!' Aisha stood taller and made her face into a kind of expressionless mask that no clouds of emotion could penetrate.

It had taken a long time before she let down her guard and removed that mask.

Now Liliana studied Aisha's smiling face. She was in awe of how far her foster-daughter had come from those painful early days. 'Sure you don't want to start writing in this yourself now?'

Aisha shook her head.

If I were to write a life story book for myself, I would make so many things different, she thought. No matter how pretty Liliana tried to make the book, with all her decorations it was a constant reminder to Aisha of all the times that she had been uprooted and torn away from the people she loved.

Liliana glanced at her foster-daughter as she stuck down the last photos of Aisha's 'band' then wrote their names underneath – Aisha, Muna, Somaya, Mariam – and closed the book. This felt like the right moment to raise the subject.

'Can I see?' Aisha asked, leaning over Liliana.

'Of course! It's your story!'

Liliana gently handed the book to Aisha. Maybe she could talk to her as they read over the pages together.

It had been a while since Aisha had really looked at the book, but now she noticed how Liliana had adorned their story so carefully, sticking in little mementos and memories of times they had shared. In fact, Aisha now realized Liliana was working her way backwards through the book, adding her own paintings, sketches and swatches of material from the clothes that Aisha had been wearing in a particular photo on a particular day. Liliana rarely threw anything away. These little scraps of material were the sorts of details that transported you back.

Aisha reached out to touch the piece of red velvet skirt that she remembered wearing, soft and comforting against her skin, and Liliana patted the cushion on the chair next to her. Aisha sat down and Liliana budged up closer so that they now sat shoulder to shoulder.

'I can't believe that I've been here for two and a

half years already.' Aisha flicked back to the formal, typed entries from before she had come to live here and felt relieved that Liliana had not been tempted to decorate these stark pages. *Nothing could be added to that time to make it feel better*, she thought as she read over the facts of her own life.

'Aisha arrived at Heathrow Airport alone.'

'Aisha's first day at Monmouth House care home . . .'

'Aisha's first day at Bishop's Primary School . . .'

'Aisha granted Refugee Status.'

In this section the photos were mostly official passport shots of a shy-looking little girl with long thin plaits who did not want her image captured. Without her hijab, she looked odd even to herself. Looking at her unveiled ten-year-old face, so exposed to the world, so alone, the weight and chill of the cold stone she'd felt lying in her stomach at that time returned to her. Occasionally one of the staff in the home had tried to capture her in a photo with the other children, but Aisha had always stood slightly aside, as if she was living in another dimension. Which was exactly how it had felt as she'd hugged her stomach tight and ached for the heat of home.

'A sad chapter.' Liliana placed a soothing hand on Aisha's back as she leafed forward again to the beginning of their time together and Liliana's own

careful handcrafted pages. 'But look at all of these happy memories!'

Aisha hugged Liliana close. 'You made them for me.'

'*We* made them!' Liliana corrected.

In the time that they had been together, everything had changed for Aisha. She had gone from being a traumatized child to a confident young woman, and it was Liliana who had held her hand every step of the way.

Liliana leaned forward and ran her finger over a sentence on the page.

'Remember? Your first words!'

'"I feel safe here",' Aisha read out loud. 'I would never have said that to anyone except you.'

Liliana wiped a tear from her eye. She feared that just bringing up the subject of meeting this family who might adopt Aisha would rock her sense of safety. But maybe she was only thinking of herself. She had promised her own children, now grown-up, that Aisha would be her last foster-child, but in her mind she had always imagined that she would keep Aisha with her until she was old enough to go off to college or university. Liliana had even pictured the graduation photos – '*Such a clever girl*' – and she had no doubt that Aisha would one day fulfil her dream of becoming a lawyer. In her own mind Liliana had decided that the two of them would graduate together: Aisha from

university and Liliana from foster-caring into a well-earned retirement.

Liliana sighed deeply. *I should have learned by now that life isn't as neat and tidy as that! But who'd have thought that anyone would come forward to offer a home to a Somali teenager with a traumatic past?* She shook herself. *This is just an introductory meeting. If Aisha doesn't want to go, no one will force her. Anyway, it might not come to anything.* As these arguments sifted through her mind, Liliana felt ashamed of her own selfishness. She attempted to savour the sight of Aisha's serene, trusting face but the spectre of the mask the child had once worn haunted Liliana and the memory seemed now to cast them both in a long brooding shadow.

It'll have to wait till tomorrow. I'll tell her tomorrow.