Burning Sunlight

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To Alex, who read as I wrote, critiqued brilliantly and rescued many iterations of the manuscripts lost through my tech ineptitude, saving me from total meltdown!

And to Henry, as ever. Precious beyond words.

LUCAS

I lay on the smooth marble floor of the Natural History Museum, staring up through the bones of the giant 3D model of the ichthyosaur. It was as extinct as humankind would be if we didn't do something soon. I was playing dead, but my heart was beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings.

Around me, a sea of bodies covered in sheets, with only their whitened faces visible. Eyes closed. Barely breathing.

There was an eerie silence. It made me think of the stillness and quiet on the moors before a storm blew in. Only we were the storm, this time.

I felt fear and elation as we waited, waited, waited. Surely people could hear my heart, which thumped wildly underneath the bag of paint taped to my chest?

Zaynab lay next to me, her bony elbow sticking into my side, her crutch propped against my leg.

'You won't chicken out, will you?' she hissed under her breath. 'Promise! Promise me you are in!'

I turned my head towards her. She had asked me this a million times. Nothing had changed. She fixed me with her fierce stare and my heart stopped for a moment.

'Well?'

I nodded.

'I'm in. I promise.'

She moved her elbow just enough to stop my ribs hurting. We closed our eyes and got back to the die-in.

In a few minutes, we'd die again and wake the world up.

Oh yes.

ZAYNAB

I did not want to go to the UK, even if it was where Mama was born and I lived until I was four. I did not want to leave Mama. I didn't want to go somewhere I would no longer see her everywhere I looked, or hear her voice, or even almost feel her touch, and I did not understand why Father would want to, either.

Except, I was forgetting. For him, his work came first, before everything – even Mama with cancer. Even Mama gone and me on my own, missing her so badly that I could barely see the point of going on.

And now his work was tearing me out of the place where Mama and I had laid our roots, except that Mama remained deep in Somaliland soil, buried beneath one of the yeheb bushes which she had helped so many people to plant in the fight against the endless droughts.

'The change will be good for us. It will help us to forget,' Father said, as we were driven to the airport.

I said nothing in return. It seemed to me that he had already forgotten. Mama would have hated this trip. She would have hated that we were flying, hated that we were abandoning people who needed our help and turning our backs on the work she had done with the rest of the team at the charity to keep women safe in camps, to plant trees, to help them find a way to make a living when they had lost everything to the desert as it spread, destroying their farms.

'And it'll be an adventure. Something for you to tell your friends about!' he added. He had completely failed to notice that I had stopped hanging out with my friends since Mama died, that they bored me with their silly talk, that I was truly alone.

We spent the first night in the UK in a hotel near Heathrow. We'd been travelling for thirteen hours including the stop in Dubai. We were tired and it was cold. Not that it didn't get cold in Borama. It did. This was a different cold. I began to shiver and felt as if the shivering would never stop. I stood in the hotel room with its dim light and huge bed and white, shiny bathroom and stared at the tray of sandwiches which had no flavour, and I knew I was shivering with hatred and sadness. People said I was lucky to have this opportunity. I did not feel lucky. I was being torn away from my home and from Mama and everything that reminded me of her. I dug around in my suitcase and brought out a scarf that had been

hers. It still smelled of her perfume and I buried my face in the fabric and breathed deeply, then I set it aside and fished out my phone. I had downloaded an app to allow me to find Mecca. The qibla appeared on my screen, flickered and swung, settling in the direction of the door. I unrolled my mat and began my evening prayers. The focus cleared my mind of anger, but the inner calm did not last long.

I could hear my father in the next-door room, taking a shower. I began counting the minutes. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

I felt anger growing inside me, spreading like a poison.

Ten. Eleven.

Finally, the noise of the shower stopped.

There is a saying in my religion: *The believer is not the one who eats his fill when the neighbour beside him is hungry*. It should also have said *'or wastes water when others go thirsty'*.

I waited for a moment or two and then I hammered on the wall and shouted: 'You hypocrite! You total hypocrite!'

Nothing.

Five minutes later, a knock at my door.

I ignored it, got into the bed with all my clothes on and fell asleep, with Mama's scarf held close.

ZAYNAB

My father was looking out the window of the train, pointing at things, trying to get me to pay attention, describing what he was seeing in a loud voice. I could hear him above the music in my headphones.

'Look at the rich soil in those ploughed fields. What fat sheep and cattle! See how lush that grass is, even now, after summer. They have none of our problems.'

He was trying to sell this place to me. Yeah. It was all green. Yeah. The cows and sheep were fat instead of scrawny. Did I really need to be told that this country was lucky?

A bit of me wanted to look out of the window, too, but then he'd have won. I closed my eyes and turned up the volume and soon I was asleep.

I dreamed I was back home. The grey hills and mountains in the distance. The turquoise and red roofs. The brightly-coloured domes of the nomads' aqals. The gob trees' twisted trunks and birds' nests of thorny branches.

And then my mother was there, too, braiding my hair, telling me about the latest family she had helped, the little girl she had fed, the woman she had taught to read. Only now she really was not with me. In my sleep, I could feel the tears coming. I could feel that I was half in the past, half in the present and I felt like I really wanted to stay in the past with Mama.

When Father woke me, a cry came out of me so loud that the other passengers all stared at me in horror and shock. My father felt he had to apologise to them. They looked away, embarrassed.

'You were dreaming,' he said, trying to take my hand. I pulled it away and he sat back in his seat and pointed out of the window, again.

'I was dreaming of Mama,' I said, searching his face for signs that he understood, but he just looked excited, like a child.

'I had to wake you to see this. Look!'

On one side, there was nothing but grey sea, heaving backwards and forwards like water in a bucket. The clouds seemed to skim the surface. It looked cold and unwelcoming. Through the other window, dark, ugly red rock rose up high. It must have been crumbling because there was wire netting all over it to trap any falling stones.

The train seemed to be travelling on a tightrope between the land and the sea.

'Just like home, eh?'

No. Not at all. It was nothing like the warm, orangey red of our soil. This was a dirty, dark red, like dried blood.

He didn't wait for my answer but went on, talking like he was a guidebook or something. 'This railway line has been washed away many times,' he told me, proudly. 'We are lucky there have been no severe storms this year. The railway is at risk from climate change and when the sea levels rise or the storms damage the rails and the line fails, it hits this region hard. Trade and tourism both suffer.'

'How sad for them,' I said, looking out to the sea, which had merged with the sky in one great, grey lump.

He frowned. 'I am just saying that we are all, in our different ways, in the same boat . . . or on the same train!'

He laughed at his own pathetic joke. Perhaps he was beginning to realise that he had made a mistake, coming back to this cold country with its privileged problems. It was a bit late for that.

'And that rock is nothing like ours,' I added and closed my eyes again. Even with them closed, I could almost see him, looking at me, searching my face for some love, some respect. Bit late for that, too.

Ten minutes later, he was reaching for my hand again.

'Come. We have arrived. This is our station.'

We heaved our bags out of the train and onto the

platform. It was raining and beginning to get dark. I still felt as if I had left part of myself in my dream and that I was now in a sort of nightmare. People were staring at us. I pulled my hijab further over my head to hide as much of my face as possible and stumbled after Father, through the ticket barrier and out onto the street. It all looked so cold. So grey. So dead.

We stood together for a while, feeling the rain soak into our clothes. I began to shiver again. Father pulled me close but I held myself away from him, stiffly, and after a moment he let go.

Someone tut-tutted and said, irritably, 'Should have stood over there, under the canopy.'

The woman who had spoken stood in front of us. Big. Wearing a massive woolly jumper covered in some disgusting crusty stains and what looked like clumps of animal fur. She smelled of cigarettes and something that reminded me of wet camel. I felt a pang of homesickness again.

'You the professor?' she asked, in the same aggressive tone.

'I am!' Father switched on his most powerful smile, teeth gleaming, eyes wide. She stared at him for a moment and then at me, before grabbing my suitcase and heading off for a car left with the engine running and the boot open. Father followed her, dragging his case, which she hoisted in as if it were as light as a feather.

The car had *Bea's Cabs* down the side and stickers of bees all over it. Was it a joke or couldn't she spell?

'Well, get in!' she said, impatiently.

The car smelled worse than she did, mainly because of various plastic trees hanging from drawing pins in the roof, which stank of something sweet and fake.

'Just you two, then?' she said, swinging the car out in front of a bus and then making a U-turn before putting her foot down.

'Just we two.'

'Where's your wife to, then? Left her behind, have you?'

'Yes. We have left her behind.' My father turned his head to look out of the car window but not before I had time to raise my eyebrows in a silent question.

'Probably for the best. Bloody awful weather here, pardon my French. What are you a professor of, then?'

'Economics, but I am here as part of a project on climate change and environmental sustainability.' My father said it in such a way that any normal person would have realised that he did not want to talk and so would shut up but not this Bea/Bee woman.

She laughed and laughed, hitting the steering wheel with the flat of her hand and rocking backwards and forwards in her seat. 'You've had a change of climate right enough!'

She thought she was funny.

We sat in silence. Nothing to look at as darkness fell. The road twisted and turned up and down hills. I felt sick. The smell. The twisting. The homesickness.

She caught my eye in her mirror.

'Don't you dare be sick in my cab, young lady! Five minutes tops. Shut your mouth and hold it in.'

She was accelerating hard as she spoke, and as we rounded a sharp corner at a crazy speed, I suddenly saw a figure in the road – a boy, his face white in the cab headlights.

He looked just like a ghost. Or just about to be made one.

I think I screamed.