RUN for your LIFE

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Little Island
Books create waves

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There are over two thousand young people in Ireland living in Direct Provision centres. Some of them have grown up in them. Some have lived out their childhoods waiting for a decision about their futures. They've had to put their lives on hold, unable to fulfil their hopes or dreams.

If you are one of them, this book is dedicated to you.

Chapter 1

'My ghosts are whispering to me,' Mother says.

She hears ghosts whispering in the air as clearly as I hear my sister's soft voice and my little brothers' laughter in the evening air. I believe her. Ghosts and spirits have always whispered to Mother or walked in her dreams. Women in our village at home used to visit her to find out if their sick cow would live, or whether they should start preparing for the funeral of an old mother-in-law.

She smiles at me now. There's sadness in her smile as memories bubble to the surface. Her sadness swallows me up and I wish I could turn back time.

It seems my life has been split in two, as different as lemons and mangoes. The first part was in our village back home, so far away. My memories are mostly warm and bright: my sister Sharnaz, my brothers Kashif and Musa, our friends Iman and Ruba. School and sunny days. Some of my memories are dark

and frightening: my father and the village council, leaving school. Having to run for our lives. Mother mourns life in our village – her husband and children, her home, her friends. She frets she made bad decisions.

'Things should have been different,' she tells me.

The second part of my life is in Ireland, as different a place from my home as you could find. It's all about new things, new places, new experiences. Some are exciting, most are difficult. My only constant is my mother, and I am hers. We cling to each other like two people drowning. We cling to each other because we have to.

Mother can't get used to life in Ireland. She can't get used to being away from everything she has known. Her body is here but her heart and soul were left in our village. It's been so hard for her when all she knows are the hot and dusty streets. The mango trees and jasmine flowers. The washing stones by the river. There are many things I miss from home, but mostly it's the people tearing at my heart. Now, I shiver at Mother's words. Her ghosts always tell of something bad.

'Your ghosts never tell you good news, Mother,' I say. 'They never announce happiness or joy. They only ever see darkness or danger.'

Mother shrugs. 'They are ghosts. They see what they see, Azari.'

• • •

It's the end of summer when we arrive in Ireland. White men in uniforms find us hidden among huge boxes and containers on the ship. Bright beams from their torches dazzle us as we

crouch in the corner among empty food packages and bottles and blankets. The men shout. More come running. I think I hear English, but I'm not sure. The voices are loud, the words fast and confusing. They pull us out. Mother struggles to get to her feet. I'm crying. Trying to get away but there's nowhere to go. Fresh air. New smells. Cold, damp wind. Daylight is bright and hurts our eyes.

The men lead us through the ship. Mother can't climb the metal ladders, so they lift her, but I won't let them touch me. I push them away. Climb on my own. Greasy rungs slip through my hands. I fall once. Twice. Scrape my shins. I'm shaking from the cold and the fright and the hunger in my belly.

It's cold in the building they bring us to. That and all the white people are enough for me to know we're far from home. I hope it's somewhere safe. I want to drink the hot tea they give us, but Mother won't let me. She hides behind me. The men ask lots of questions and I am certain now they're speaking English. Neither of us speaks. A man with a first-aid kit arrives. Mother turns her back.

'He's a doctor,' I say. It makes no difference to her.

He bandages my bleeding shins. Checks my eyes, ears, mouth. Listens to my heart.

'Where is this?' I ask him.

'You're in Ireland now.' He smiles. He speaks English slowly.

'We want to apply for international protection,' I say. I've practised this over and over since leaving home. 'Please help.'

'I'll tell them outside. You must make a formal application in a few days – don't forget.'

After he leaves, they bring us sandwiches in a packet and water. We're exhausted and tired and hungry. The sun is dropping when there's a knock on the door. A bearded man comes in. He says nothing, but leaves two coats on the table, smiling. Working men's coats, smelling of oil and hard labour. Warm and comforting. We wrap them around us. Curl up on the floor. Mother sleeps for a while. I watch the moon rise over black water.

A man in uniform arrives. 'We've a room sorted.'

I stare out the car windows at trees bending in the wind. The ground is littered with pale leaves shining in the car lights. Shrubs and hedges are wind-twisted. I shiver inside the big man's coat.

'This is their summer,' I whisper to Mother.

'Imagine how their winter will be,' she says.

. . .

I hardly remember the first few days. I'm tired and scared and cold. Everything is strange and confusing. Other women sleep in a large room with us, but we don't speak to them. We sleep a lot. Eat little. Talk less. We curl up together in the same bed, holding each other. We go downstairs for food on some days, but I hardly recognise what's on our plates and am usually sick after. They give us spare clothes. Towels. Soap. It's four days before I remember the doctor's words about a formal application. I ask one of the other women about it.

'Is it too late? Will we be sent home?'

'Go to the government office – the IPO,' she tells me. 'It's the International Protection Office in the city. Someone goes from here almost every day. You'll have company.'

They give us bus money at the front desk. It's wet and cold when we leave the Centre with three other people. We arrive before the office even opens but there's already a queue.

'So many people looking for this protection,' Mother says.

White people in suits and smart clothes stare at us as they walk past. When the office opens, we're given a ticket and wait all morning as they call out ticket numbers. The waiting area quickly fills up with people. They're talking many different languages. It's noisy and busy. Crying children and babies.

Our turn comes at last and we're called into a small room with a desk. My heart sinks when I see a man is about to interview us. This is not good. What man is going to believe a woman? Government officials don't listen to women.

'This won't go well,' I whisper to Mother.

'Do whatever he tells you,' she says. 'He knows best.'

I glare at her. She always believes that men know best. That they should be in charge. She doesn't question if it's fair or right.

The man speaks slowly and asks simple questions I understand. I translate for Mother, but she shakes her head and refuses to answer. She won't speak in front of this unknown man when we have no male relative with us. At home, Father dealt with all official matters. Mother never went to school. She can't read or write, and as a woman, was never allowed to speak up. And now that she needs to, she won't.

'You need to answer my questions,' the man says. 'I can't help if you won't speak to me.'

When I translate his words, Mother turns her back and says nothing.

The man makes a phone call. Turns on a speaker, and a woman speaks our language to Mother and me, and English to him. This is good for two reasons: first, she's a woman; second, we understand her. I take a deep breath and pray that Mother will answer now, but it makes no difference: Mother won't speak to any of us.

'I can answer instead,' I tell the man. My stomach twists even as I say this. What if I say the wrong thing? What if I get us sent back home? I left school at twelve, so my English isn't good. I can't put words on the feelings waking me at night. Mother has a different memory of what happened. If she would speak up, she could tell our story.

'That's not allowed,' says the man. He sounds annoyed. 'Your mother is the adult. She must respond.'

'Please, Mother,' I say. 'Just answer the questions.'

But Mother won't even look at me. The silence in the little room stretches out. I'm hot and uncomfortable. Finally, the official pushes back his chair and stands up.

'This is most irregular,' he says. 'I need to talk to someone.'

He leaves the room as the woman interprets his words.

'This is not normally permitted,' the man says to me when he comes back. 'But on this occasion, we'll allow you to respond instead of your mother. Are you OK with that?'

My stomach flips as I nod and try to settle down.

And the questions come like monsoon rain:

- Where are you from?
- Why are you here?

- How did you get here?
- Why can't you go home?
- Where were you before you arrived here?
- Why do you want international protection?
- Why did you leave your country?

I don't know what to say. How to answer. The man talks to the interpreter. She tells me to relax. That it's OK. To take my time. He smiles. I take a deep breath and begin.

Explaining why we left our own country, and what happened to us is the hardest part. All that remembering. All that reliving. For weeks, I've been trying to put it out of my head. Trying not to remember. But now, I awaken all the terrible memories crouching inside me. Things I'm scared to remember, scared to forget. I put words to the memories for the woman on the phone and the man who doesn't understand me. The remembering brings powerful feelings with it, feelings that cut my heart open until my voice shrinks small. I can't get the words out. Can't make myself understood through my sobs and tears.

The man types into his computer, watching my face as I describe our last days at home. How we had to run for our lives. He gives me a break. Brings me a glass of water. Mother squeezes my hand.

As the questions go on, I think Mother's ghosts have fled her tormented thoughts and come to live in my head instead: Sharnaz's voice. My father's. Uncle Rashid. I smell the mango tree and water lilies. Feel the hot sun on my skin. When I finally reach the end and tell them about the men finding us on the

ship, my energy is gone. I drop my head. Draw breath. I have nothing more to tell.

But it's not yet over. The man prints out pages and pages of typing. My story. He reads it back to me, word for word. Slowly. Piece by piece, the woman translates it for me. I live my story yet again through their words. Mother sighs and shakes her head. I listen like my brothers listened to my made-up stories at home. I don't own it any more. It's my story, but I've given it away. In some strange way, that's a comfort. It's now on paper for someone else to read. The man hands me a pen and I write my name at the end of my story, our story, to show it's the truth. He keeps a copy and gives me a copy for myself. A book of what happened to us. Then, we're photographed and fingerprinted.

By the time we're finished, I'm exhausted and shaking and cold. We wait outside in the rain until the others are finished and travel back to the Centre together. I don't cry until we get to the room we share with the other women. They gather around, murmuring and bleating like goats fretting for their kids.

'It's so hard,' they say. 'Such a difficult thing, this first interview.'

'Why photographs? Fingerprints?' I say. 'What have we done?'

'It's for everyone,' they say in English. 'Doesn't mean anything.'

'At home, they only photograph and fingerprint criminals.'

'It's part of your application.' The women smile and rub my back. 'Now you must wait for their decision. That's the hard part.'

The next day, my tiredness and fear take over. I feel ill.

'It's sadness coming out,' Mother tells me. 'No longer deep in your heart.'

'What if they don't believe me?' I ask. 'What if they decide it's not true? That we're dishonourable women? What if they decide to send us back to our village, back to Father?'

I lie in bed all day, but my heart won't let me rest. My thoughts run wild. My head is haunted with memories. In my waking nightmares, the Irish office sends our photographs and fingerprints to the village council and we're found. Every plane passing overhead carries Father and Uncle Rashid to drag us home.

Days pass slowly.

The women in our room get their official letters and move on. Others arrive to fill their beds, tired and upset and usually cold. We tell them about the bus to the office in the city. Comfort them when they return from their interviews.

'This place is filled with sadness and suffering,' Mother says. 'The walls only hear stories of loss and heartache. Of the graveyards in our hearts.'

. . .

Our letter finally arrives to say we can stay in Ireland to finish our application.

'Are we safe now?' Mother says. 'Can we live here?'

'Not yet,' I tell her. 'This is the beginning.'

'You're moving on now,' the man in charge tells us. 'Can't stay here once you've got your letter.'

'Where to?' I ask.

'No idea,' he says. 'You're in Direct Provision from here on.'

I don't know what this Direct Provision means. I don't know that it will become our life. He gives us money for our journey and, written on a piece of paper, the address we must go to and the buses to take us there. I don't sleep on our last night. I'm too scared of where we're going next. Mother and I on our own, finding our way across this new country.

We leave early next morning and arrive later that day at a dark old house. They give us bed sheets and toilet paper. Bunk beds in a room with four other women, none from our home country. No planes overhead. A toilet and wash-hand basin between us all. Shower room down the hall.

Mother and I sleep together in one bunk, wrapped around each other. We leave the top bunk empty. Every morning, I wake in the darkness to stare out the window at cold fields. Watch grey daylight creep into the night sky. The room is always chilly. Condensation drips down the glass. One of the panes is broken. When I touch it with my fingertips, cold air scrapes like a blade over my skin. It reminds me of a broken window in our home, a long time ago.

We don't talk to the other women. They move around us, rustling, rummaging, talking, in another world, as though a veil separates them from us. Mother spends her days curled in bed, staring at the walls. The pillow is damp from her tears. She has little to say. She sighs and rubs her shoulders and legs as though her bones hurt. She complains of the weather,

the food, the people, the light. She doesn't like the window open because she gets cold. She doesn't want to get up or to eat. When I hug her, her bones are sharp and hard under her skin.

They give us money every week. Mother and I look at the coins and notes.

'What's it worth?' Mother asks.

'I don't know.'

I recognise the coins from the bus money we were given but don't know their value. Father looked after the money at home. Irish money means nothing to me.

. . .

Time passes. I don't keep track of the days. It's always dark now. Always cold. Just when it seems the sun will never rise again, I begin to wake up. Come out of my dream world. Little by little, I notice things. Recognise the women in my room. Before, I didn't know any of their faces but now I know them all. The white woman on her own lies on her bed, rocking and picking wallpaper from the wall, peeling it off in long strips. Two older brown women seem to speak a little of the same language and talk to each other, although they're strangers, but I can tell from their hand gestures and the way they stop and start that it's not their native language. The black woman is with two young men in another room. Across the hall is a men's room. A tall man with brown skin and heavy brows watches me. He wears white *shalwar kameez*. Leather sandals. Black socks. I've never heard him speak so I don't know his

language. Always on the landing when I pass, his dark eyes linger on me. I know how men watch women. That look they have. He frightens me.

'He watches me all the time,' I tell Mother.

'Do you think he knows your father?' That's all she's worried about.

I shake my head, reassuring her. 'It's how he watches me. How he's always there.'

'Don't go out on your own,' Mother says. 'Only with me or the other women.'

We come and go in twos and threes and there's comfort and safety in it. It feels familiar. It's what women do at home. The other women smile and nod at us. They welcome us with them. Tell us what happens next.

'Only legal people know how to fill in the forms,' they tell me in English. 'People with special schooling. Don't send anything in without their help.' They give us addresses for legal aid. Phone numbers. 'Ring them,' they say. 'Tell them you need their help. Show them your story.'

When I ring the legal aid people, they tell me to contact them after the government office has written. They send more information to read, more forms to fill out. I put them with my typed story.

The government papers arrive soon after: a thick packet filled with official documents. So much paperwork scares me. I left school almost three years ago. How do we do this? I pull out the papers the legal people sent me. Try to figure out what I need to do. Mother is no help.

'Go and see them,' the black woman tells me. 'Meet them and talk to them. It's easier.'

It means we have to find out about more buses. More places to find. More travelling. Mother doesn't want to come with me. The heartbreak of home fills her heart and soul and stops her doing anything.

'I'm tired, Azari,' she says.

'We have to get this sorted, Mother.'

'You go. I need to sleep.'

'We need to do this today. They're expecting us.'

'Then you go ahead. I'll be here when you get back.'

I can't do this alone. I'm too scared. 'Please, Mother.'

'We'll go tomorrow,' she says, closing her eyes. While she sleeps, I ring the legal aid people. Ask to meet them the next day.

We spend the whole day on buses and in offices, listening and talking and signing forms. We meet a woman called Sheila who agrees to help us. She insists on speaking with Mother, not me.

'You're only a child,' she tells me. 'You're not allowed do this. It's not legal. I have to speak with a responsible adult who understands what's happening.'

'My identity card says I'm eighteen.' I hand over the card Father got me when I left school.

Sheila looks at the card. She turns it over. Looks at me.

'This is fake,' she says. 'You're a child.'

She calls an interpreter but this time it's a man: Mother refuses to speak to him. Sheila prints out information in our

language to show her instead, but Mother pushes it away. Turns her back.

'She can't read,' I say.

In the end, Sheila talks to me about everything, even though I'm only a child. She shakes her head. 'I shouldn't be doing this.'

She runs through the same questions the man in the IPO asked. It's not so difficult this time around: she's a woman and I already have my written story to show her so I don't have to relive it. She's not happy I was interviewed alone in the IPO.

'I wasn't alone,' I tell her. 'Mother was there.'

'It's obvious you're a child. You had no legal representation. And your mother …' She looks at Mother, scowling and refusing to speak. 'This is not good.' She pauses for a moment, then appears to make a decision. 'Fine. I'll meet you a few times to make sure we get our information right and have everything we need.'

She makes an appointment to meet us the following week and we return to the Centre. I'm ready for the sadness to come out this time, for the tiredness to hit me. I rest the next day. Let my tears come as they wish.

. . .

Weeks stretch out. It rains for days on end. The orange and gold leaves are gone. Only bare trees now.

We meet Sheila three, four, five times. I sign papers, answer questions, listen to the interpreter. Whenever there's an appointment, Mother refuses to come with me until I plead with her.

Every time, she asks if the decision has been made. Every time, I tell her we're only at the beginning.

My head aches. There's nothing to do in the Centre but sleep.

'Come down to the television room,' the other women say.

We join them for a few nights. I like the music and colour on television, the exciting stories. It's like looking in on other people's lives. I learn things to say:

- *Where did you think you were going today – on a picnic?*
- *Say what you see!*

I hear strong words to call people: 'The Beast.' 'Dark Destroyer.' 'Vixen.' We don't stay long though because Mother gets a headache and feels tired. At home, she was busy all the time, from dawn to dark, and never seemed to be as exhausted as she is now. I'm not tired. I need to do something. To get out of the Centre for a while.

'We can't go out,' Mother says.

'Why not?'

'It's not safe.'

'We've been on buses lots of times.'

'I'm not well, Azari. Stay with me.'

What happened back home shreds my sleep. I lie in the dark, reliving everything. My legs and arms twitch. I need to break the tedium or I'll go crazy. Need to do something. If Mother won't get the bus somewhere with me, I'll have to stay close to the Centre.

'I'll go for a walk,' I say.

'On your own?' Mother says.

'I've seen women walking on their own here, Mother. It's safe. It's allowed.' I look at her as an exciting idea pops into my head. 'I might even *run*!'

Even saying the word gives me a little zip of excitement. Father stopped me running: *Women don't run, Azari.*

'You can't,' Mother says. 'Your father told you not to.'

I look at Mother. I take a deep breath. 'Father's not here, Mother. He can't tell me what to do.'

She shakes her head. 'Women don't run. You know this. Your father told you.'

'Perhaps Father was wrong.' I'm treading a dangerous line.

'Men are never wrong, Azari.' Mother sets her mouth in a tight line. 'Your father was not wrong. He knows these things.'

Now is not the time to argue with Mother. I need to do something for myself.

The girl on the front desk is not much older than me. She might be a good person to ask. It takes me days to work up the courage to speak to her.

I stop at the desk. She looks up from her phone.

'Can women run here?' I ask.

'Do you mean like jogging?'

'Is that running?'

She nods. 'It's fine to run, but not after dark. Otherwise, you're grand to head out. Are you a big runner?'

I'm confused. 'This size.'

She laughs. 'I mean do you run a lot?'

'Not for a long time.' The girl is nice. 'And for running clothes?'

'You'll get runners and leggings in the department store in the main shopping centre.' She points out the door. 'About half an hour. Out the gate, turn left.'

Next morning, I'm up and dressed early to walk to the shops to get running clothes. Even though she's not happy about it, Mother gives me money.

'Come with me,' I say. 'We'll be together. We'll mind each other.'

She refuses. The other women are more encouraging.

'You'll be fine, girl,' they say. 'It's safe to walk alone here.'

'I'll watch you from the window,' Mother says. 'And I'll wait up until you get back.'

'It's a short walk. I'll be home by lunchtime.'

The whole way to the shops, I'm terrified. Women don't walk alone at home. I pretend I'm with Sharnaz, walking like we used to in our village. I hold a whole conversation with her. I've been talking to her more and more lately, and she chats back. It brings her closer. I imagine she's here.

Pull yourself together and stop being such a chicken, Sharnaz says. *We got the bus into town together and it wasn't a problem for you.*

'I know,' I argue. 'But you were with me. I knew where I was going. How to get home. I knew the village, the town, the route. Every one of those things is different now.'

You've come from our little village all the way to Ireland and you're still alive. You've been on buses around Ireland. This is only something small. I'm with you. We can find out together.