Kiran Millwood Hargrave

LEILA AND THE BLUE FOX

with
Tom de Freston

Orion

With our deepest admiration for our designer Alison Padley,
the 'third author' who brings our worlds to the page - K & T

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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The Inuit call her *tiriganiarjuk*, the little white one, though she is dark grey-blue as the thickest ice, as the rocks she scours for food. The scientists tracking her call her Miso, because it is a sweet but sharp name and they think she has a sweet but sharp face. We call her fox, because that is our word in our language, but she is not just fox, or tiriganiarjuk, or Miso.

She is paws thickly coated to move through the coldest lands. She is ears swivelling, listening for cod moving beneath the channels of snow and ice. She is balance as she climbs the steepest cliffs, rootling for eggs and nestlings. She is yaps, and barks, and teeth, a belly with pointed hunger inside it. She is full of needs she has no names for, and follows them like a magnet toward its true North. She is all these things, and more, and only herself.

ONE

Look them in the eyes, but don't stare, don't blink too much, smile, not with teeth, with your eyes, but don't squint.

Leila repeats Mona's instructions in her head, told to her so often she can hear the rhythm of her older cousin's words in her ears, the slight panic in her voice even though she was trying not to let it show. But the face in the mirror won't do as it's told. She looks exhausted, and the woman standing at the next sink is starting to stare, soaping her hands longer than needed.

The smell of the airport soap is too sweet and combines with the chemical toilet stink to make Leila's tummy churn. She should have eaten the banana Mona made her take. Her backpack is

heavy, and something hard is digging into the small of her back.

She threw everything in when the security man was done searching it, conscious of the flight guardian waiting for her, of people watching her as they walked past. She already stood out, she knew. There were no other children travelling alone. No other girls with black hair, and light-brown skin. No one else who had been coached by their cousin how to look at the immigration officer.

Leila gives up on her face and straightens her rucksack.

Look them in the eyes. Don't stare.

The soaping woman could do with taking Mona's advice. Leila turns and stares back at her. The woman colours, white cheeks pinkening, and before she can lose her nerve Leila strides out of the bathroom, feeling taller.

It doesn't last more than a couple of steps. She bumps right into the flight guardian, releasing a waft of sugary perfume.

'Whoops-a-daisy,' says the woman, who is tanned, thin and blonde, and called Fiona. Fiona, who is dressed in a pencil skirt so tight her knees knock together and heels that clack on the shiny surface of the airport floor, and who seems to think speaking to a twelve-year-old is the same as talking to a six-year-old. 'All OK? Did you wash your hands?'

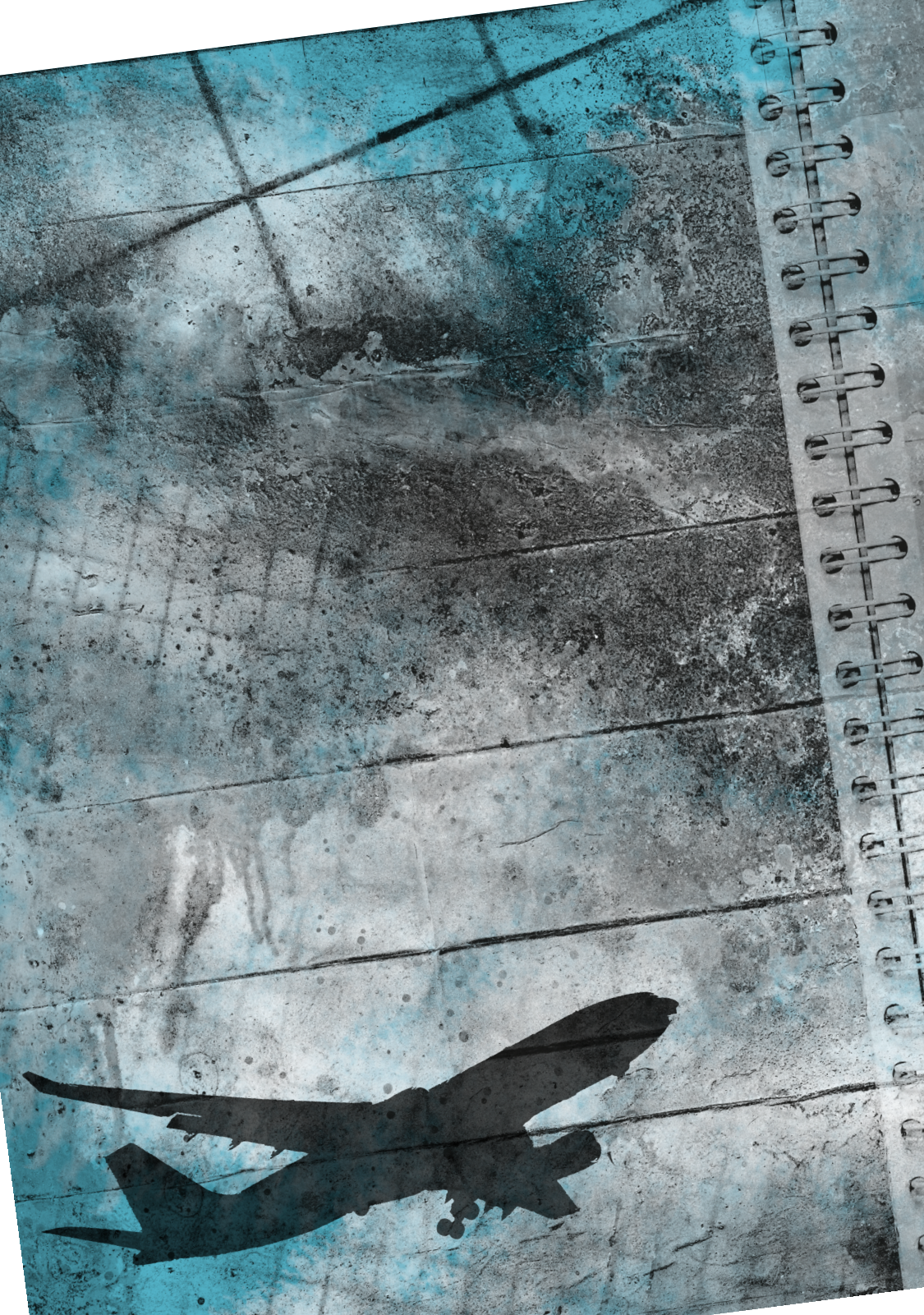
Leila doesn't dignify that with a response. Fiona's smile falters. 'All right then.' She pats Leila on the head. 'Ready? This way.'

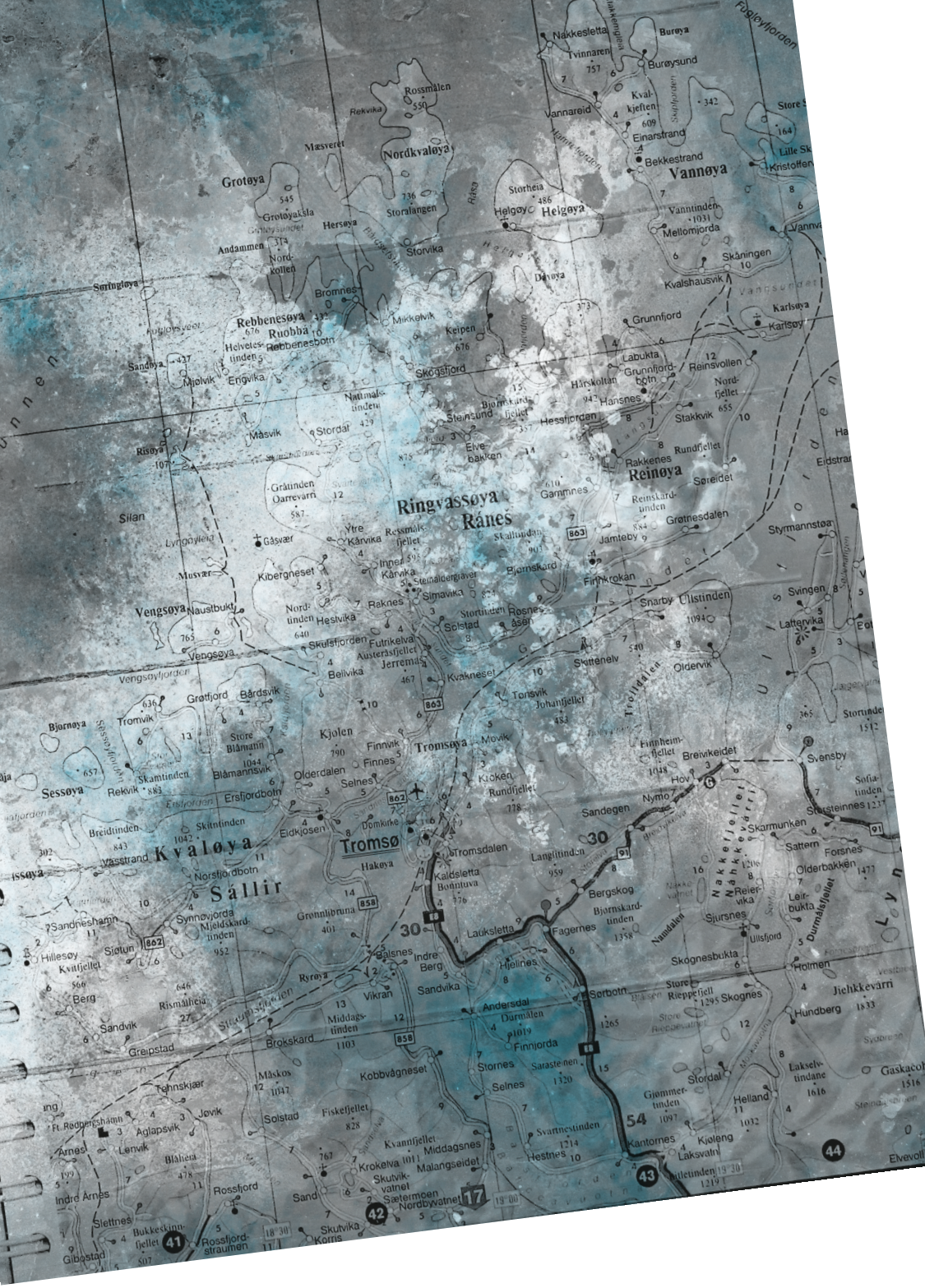
Leila tries to swallow down the lump in her throat as they approach the signs, written in unfamiliar Norwegian, and below it in cursive, *Immigration*. Fiona steers her past the small queues for *National* and *International* arrivals and *Schengen* and *Domestic*, to a narrow strip pressed against the wall. A tired-eyed man sits behind a desk beneath a sign saying

Other.

Leila is unsurprised to see this word: it is what she has felt since she left her aunt's terraced house in Croydon.

They approach him, the final obstacle in this trip months in the making. He's an underwhelming gatekeeper.

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Keipen
Grunnfjord
Rebbenesøya
Ruobbá
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Stordal
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Jamteby
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Stortinden
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Solstad
Snarby
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Latervika
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Durmålsfjellet
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Sjursnes
Ullsfjord
Hillesøy
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Kvitfjellet
Berg
Ryrøya
Salsnes
Indre Berg
Hjelnes
Skogsnesbukta
Holmen
Rismålheia
Vikran
Sandvika
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Store Rieppefjell
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Kobbvågneset
Stornes
Sarasteinen
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Soistad
Fisketjellet
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Look them in the eyes, but don't stare, don't blink too much.

The desk is higher than Leila's head. She can just see the top of the man's forehead, where it meets his greying hair. He leans forward a little and holds his hand out to her. Leila fights the absurd urge to shake it.

'Passport,' prompts Fiona, smiling with all her teeth at the immigration officer. Leila curses in her head, imagining Mona's eyes rolling. *Have your passport ready*, she'd said. That's why Leila had gone to the bathroom in the first place, to take some deep breaths and practise her face and make sure her passport was to hand. But the staring woman had thrown her, and now she feels her palms go sweaty as she slings her rucksack off her back to search through it.

Her hand mushes into the banana, gone soft after so long in her bag. She can feel herself smearing it around, over her book and her phone and Mona's earphones, and she's panicking now, trying to remember the last place she'd seen it. Did she leave it in the black plastic tray when the unsmiling man checked her bag?

'Whoops-a-daisy,' laughs Fiona, brandishing the small blue book. 'Forgot you'd given it to me!'

As she hands it over to the officer, Leila fights back tears. *It's all right*, she tells her racing heart. She ducks to zip up her rucksack, wiping her face hurriedly and feeling the sticky banana residue deposit itself on her cheek. Before she can clean it off Fiona pulls

her gently back a couple of steps, so the man can compare her photo with her face.

Look them in the eyes, don't stare, don't blink too much. But she is blinking, rapidly, trying to control the tears. She digs her fingernails into her palm as he looks at her. A ball is swelling and swelling in her throat, making it hard to breathe. She hates this, all of it. She hated saying goodbye to Mona and her aunty at the airport, she hated the flight, with its dry, artificial air and Fiona, too silent and too smiley. She hated the man searching her bag, she hated the staring woman and she hates the banana and she hates this man, looking at her like she—

But he's looking down now at her passport. His hand moves in a practised motion, reaching for a stamp, up and down and a satisfying click, then he is handing the passport back, not to Fiona, but to her.

'Welcome to Tromsø,' he says in a lilting, bored voice.

She takes the passport. It was easy, it was over. The part she and Mona had been most scared about. The part she'd had nightmares about, nightmares full of white rooms and bolted down tables. Done. Leila wipes the banana off her face with her sleeve. She feels almost dizzy with relief as she follows Fiona to the conveyer belt, around which bags are already circulating.

'All OK?' asks Fiona. Leila's starting to think it might be.

Leila lets her breath out slowly. It's exhausting being braced

all the time, against the staring, the occasional comments. Even at her school, where there are other Middle Eastern girls, even other Syrians. It makes moments like the immigration officer looking away feel like the best sort of relief. If she can't be invisible, she just wants to fit in.

Her bag, a beat-up suitcase borrowed from her aunty, her amma, arrives on its side. Leila stifles a laugh as she watches Fiona in her tight pencil skirt totter against the weight of the suitcase as she manoeuvres it on to its squeaky casters.

'You'll want your coat,' says Fiona. 'Norwegian warmth is less warm than you're used to.'

Leila assumes she means compared to England, which isn't very comforting. She can't remember much of home from before, and Mona won't talk about it. Amma sometimes talks about the markets open to the heat, piled high with fruit she only knows the Arabic names for, about their flat with air conditioning in every room and handwoven rugs they had to leave behind. Basbousa, the cat she and Mum still cry over, left in the care of a neighbour who no longer has regular electricity or hot water. All of these memories have the texture of dreams, fading even as she speaks them.

'Coat!' says Fiona. 'Pop it on.'

Leila unbuckles the belt around the case and unzips the front compartment. Mona packed for her with perfect care, thinking

of everything, even rolling her coat with its hood at the top, so Leila can pull it straight out and watch it unfurl like a flag. She slips it on, feeling instantly less conspicuous inside the deep purple jacket, a hand-me-down from Mona of course, but this means it is like new, apart from a rip in the left pocket that Leila sometimes re-rips open when she is especially nervous.

She checks: Mona has stitched it tight shut again. She must be the only seventeen-year-old who still learns sewing. Leila's fingers brush crinkled plastic, and she smiles to herself. Mona has hidden a whole handful of Werther's Originals in there, the gold wrappings like treasure. It's a squeeze of the hand meaning: *you got this*.

'Come along!' says Fiona, too brightly. 'Nearly there!'

She is looking strained, and Leila can tell she wants rid of her. Leila pulls the squeaky-wheeled case after her, and it is only as they approach a final set of automatic doors, she dares think about the main reason her tummy is a string of twisting knots. Because through those doors is the reason for the dozen-page visa application, the face-practising, the trip, all of it. Through those doors, is Mum.

Leila chews her lip as she follows Fiona out into a glass-fronted arrival hall. Her heart has escaped her chest and is pounding somewhere near her ears. She feels hot, her hands clammy, and wonders, too late, if she should have practised her face for this

part, too. She scans the unfamiliar crowd. Everyone is white, and tall.

Mum isn't there.

Leila stops walking, but Fiona says, 'there we are,' and click-clacks off towards a white lady in a green puffa jacket, holding a handwritten sign. The sign says **Leila Saleh**. It isn't anyone Leila recognises. Leila feels like she's standing at the top of a cliff, her tummy somersaulting. Mum isn't there. This woman is obviously here to collect her. The disappointment in Leila's chest sharpens quickly into anger.

Six years. Most mums wouldn't be able to wait a moment, a second longer. She knows this because of Amma, because of all her friends' parents clucking at the school gate, beaming as soon as they see their children. They miss them after six hours, let alone six years. But Mum has sent – who? A stranger.

Leila squares her shoulders. Why should she care, if Mum so clearly doesn't? Fiona is waving her over, a little desperately. Leila follows.