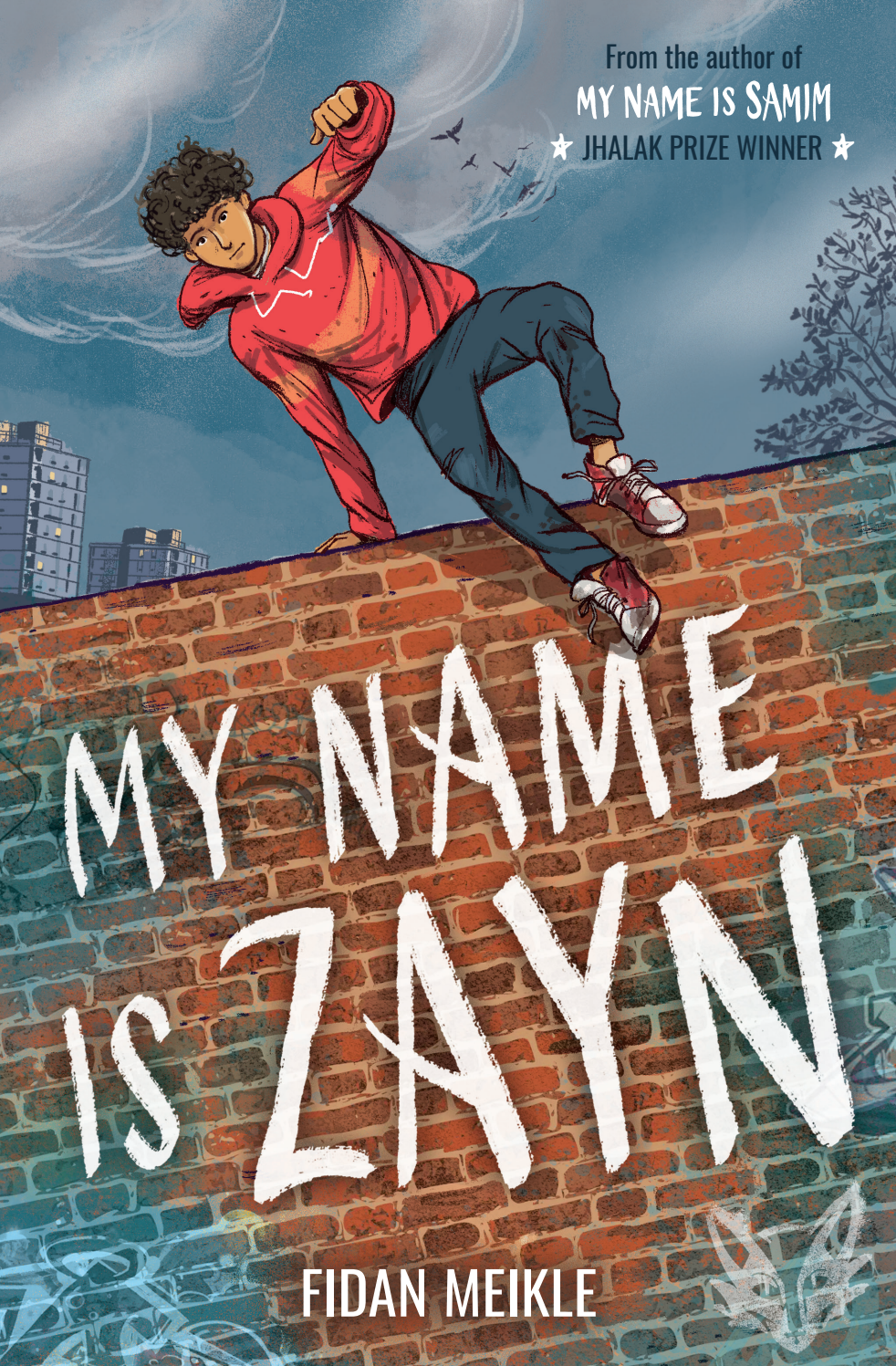

From the author of
MY NAME IS SAMIM
★ JHALAK PRIZE WINNER ★
MY NAME IS ZAYN
FIDAN MEIKLE

To Leyla,
You read Samim's story and then you did something wonderful. You worked hard to raise money for asylum seekers, proving that empathy and kindness aren't just feelings – they are powers. Powers that can change lives. Powers that can change the world.

And with a heart so big and kind, I love seeing just how powerful you are.
Mum x

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MY NAME IS ZAYN

FIDAN MEIKLE

Kelpies

1
My Name Is Zayn

November 2021

My name is Zayn, and if I had to tell you my story I'd begin with the day Death came for me, but I wasn't ready to go. As my sweet grandmother used to say, "When Death knocks, make it wait at the door."

When you imagine a deadly sea, you think of roaring waves and raging storms. But the water that swallowed our little boat, and me with it, barely moved. Yet, one by one, we slipped inside its giant mouth.

I was told that when the rescuers pulled me out of the water, my face was plum-blue and I didn't have a heartbeat. Seconds later, there was a drumming in my chest again. It was a miracle! Like being born a second time.

When I was born the first time, in Afghanistan, my dear mother, *madar-jan*, sang grateful prayers, kissed my cheeks, poked my tiny nose and stared at my baby face for the whole day.

The second time, no one sang for me or aww-ed at my handsome looks. Instead, when I opened my eyes, I was lying on a hospital bed. A crumple-faced man was staring at me, flashing a torchlight in my eyes, as if he was searching for treasure there. Then he said something cheerful that I couldn't understand, gave me a thumbs-up and left.

I gaped left and right, trying to figure out what was happening.

For a while, I didn't remember anything about my life. Nothing at all. It's a weird feeling, I tell you. Must be what it's like to be a baby, to have a smooth brain, unwrinkled by any thoughts, memories or worries. Like baby me, I also couldn't understand a word anyone was saying. All I knew was the language people spoke around me wasn't the one in my head, and the one coming out of my mouth wasn't the one anyone else seemed to know.

But the next day, a smiley woman wearing a hijab stepped through the curtains around my bed that shielded me from the rest of the hospital ward.

"*Salam*," she greeted me gently. She spoke Dari, the language I understood, and I'm not ashamed to say I also cried like a baby, grateful to finally talk to someone. Her name was Farida, and she was a translator, but I just called her Auntie. That's what we do in Afghanistan. We call older women and men 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' out of respect, as if to say, "You are part of the family."

Behind Auntie Farida came a man in a blue jumper. A solicitor.

He said his job was to make sure I was treated fairly. The woman who followed him with a notebook under her arm was my caseworker. She was there to figure out how and why I came to the UK.

I shrugged when they asked me that question. I had no clue how or why I came to the UK.

But when Auntie Farida asked my name, *Zayn* flew off my tongue.

I startled myself with that.

"Nice to meet you, Zayn." Auntie smiled. Then she held something out to me.

It was a star map, big and grey, water-warped and ripped at the corners, but you could still see the constellations, tiny white stitches across the paper. She said the map was tied to my chest in a watertight bag when they pulled me from the sea.

Uncle Karim's star map!

I traced a constellation I remembered well with a finger. *Scorpius*. The tail gave it away.

The memories hit me all at once. First like little taps on the door, then banging, then bursting in.

Memories of Iran. Turkey. Greece. Italy. France. And finally, the English Channel.

Each place from my long journey sent shivers through me.

My throat closed up, and I clutched my head like it might split open.

Auntie Farida pressed a cup of water into my palm. "Drink," she said, holding my shaky hand so I didn't drop the cup.

Gulp after gulp, cool water soothed my chest and my headache eased.

"You were on a boat that sank in the English Channel, Zayn," she said. "Do you remember that? Do you have parents? Were they with you?"

I shook my head. "My parents died years ago. But my friend… he was there with me… Samim!" I darted forward. "Where is he? What happened to him?"

Auntie translated for me. "They'll try to find out," she said, and I nodded gratefully, my eyes hot with tears.

"Tell us about the boat crossing, Zayn. What happened in the English Channel?" Auntie translated the caseworker's question.

I pulled my knees to my chest, and my heart started to race.

The hospital room faded, and my memory dragged me back to the boat in the dead of night. Cold, black water stretched all around us, and fear was a pile of rocks in my chest, shifting and scraping.

Something terrible was coming.

I could feel it.

2

Two Brothers in a Rubber Boat

We were on the last part of our journey. The final push to the UK, the place Samim and I kept calling our new home, like it was already waiting for us with bread rising in the oven.

A smuggler packed us into a rubber boat in the middle of the night, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, all of us chasing the same dream: safety. The floor sagged under our weight and squeaked every time someone moved. The smuggler shoved a satellite phone into one man's hand, jumped out of the boat and pushed us out towards the open sea.

The shore slid away.

The water around us was black and endless, sometimes still, other times slapping our dinghy, like it was warning us that it could flip us over whenever it wanted.

Samim, thirteen like me, sat beside me, hugging his long legs to his chest. He was staring at nothing, his eyes far away, lips moving like he was talking to himself.

On the map, the English Channel is just a thin strip of blue.

But from our boat, it was a whole ocean. We'd come so far to reach it.

From our mountain village in Afghanistan to stirring giant pots of stew for workers at the stone-cutting factory in Iran. From crossing the snowy mountains in Turkey to the plastic tents of the refugee camp in Greece. From the paradise house in Italy, where we briefly knew joy, to the hungry winter in France. We spent years running, hiding, waiting and hoping. And now, this was it. Just one last crossing. One last sea between us and safety.

The woman in front of us on the boat touched my hand. "Take it," she said softly, offering a thin slice of apple to me, then to Samim.

"Thank you, Auntie." I placed the slice on my tongue, and its sweetness spread through my mouth. My stomach was empty, my lips dry and cracked, but that slice of apple felt like the richest thing I'd ever tasted.

"What's the first thing you'll eat in England?" Samim asked, his eyes still distant.

I thought for a second. "Pizza. Like the ones we had in Auntie's house in Italy. With hot cheese that burns your mouth."

He smiled. "Mmm… good choice."

"What about you? What will you eat?"

Samim shrugged. "Something warm," was all he said, and I wrapped my arm around his skinny shivering body.

We fell quiet again.

We grew up side by side, Samim and I, as close as brothers.

In the same village, learning times tables in the same dusty schoolroom. We just slept in different houses. His was a two-storey half-home, half-pharmacy, always smelling of herbs and medicines. Mine was a farmhouse, buzzing with voices: my uncle, aunt, grandparents, father, mother and two sisters all under one roof. There was always someone boiling tea, always someone kneading dough, someone shouting across the yard…

That life felt like a story I'd once heard. Made up. Imagined. Not mine any more.

Samim and I were ten when the same bomb tore through our homes.

We were playing football in the field, running and laughing, when we saw it coming. A buzz in the sky, a tiny thing from the ground. But that tiny thing made the earth shake. And that tiny thing turned our street into rubble.

We ran home, but there was no home left to run to.

A beastly fire chewed through the bones of our houses as we stood side by side, coughing and watching. We stared at the patch of ruined land where just an hour earlier Samim's mother had hung out clothes and swept the street, and mine had fed chickens and goats. Where our fathers smoked tobacco after a long day's work, talking to each other over the fence. Where the elders played backgammon under the almond tree. Where our sisters baked cakes from mud and wildflowers.

And then… it was all gone. *They* were all gone.

Samim's Uncle Roshan took us in, and for a while we worked in his garage, hands black with grease, helping him fix cars.

Then one night, we woke to Uncle's shouting and the smell of smoke. Taliban fighters had set Uncle's house on fire.

Smoke curled from the cracks in the walls, and sparks from the burning roof rained down around us. We jumped out of the window barefoot, then stood in the cold and watched the house crackle and roar, until it went black and silent.

The Taliban ruled parts of Afghanistan through fear. People in our village went quiet when they were mentioned; doors shut a little faster when they passed. They came for Samim and his uncle because Samim's parents had worked with American soldiers. To the Taliban, anyone who helped the Americans was a traitor. And even though Samim's parents were already gone, the mark stayed on Samim. In the eyes of the Taliban, he was a traitor, too.

Our village wasn't safe for us any more, and we had no choice but to run.

Then, in Iran, Uncle Roshan was shot in the leg. He told us to leave him behind, to keep going without him. He promised that he'd catch up with us once he got better. Samim held on to that promise. For a while, I did too…

Now, almost four years since we left our homeland, it was just the two of us. Two brothers in a rubber boat, drifting on a black sea, so very close to the UK, the land we'd dreamed about. Samim's other uncle lived there, Jalal, and he'd promised to help us. Only we didn't have his phone number or address any more because the phone it was on got stolen back in Turkey. But hope is a stubborn thing. We were sure we'd find him. Surely,

once we got there, someone would help us find him.

Samim leaned his head against my shoulder. He was counting pi. He did it when he was scared, said it calmed his mind. I think he liked how this pi number went on forever. Maybe it made him feel that some things, at least, didn't have to end.

I watched him for a moment, wishing I had something like that. Something that could stop my chest turning into a sack of rocks from fear and worries.

The motor buzzed on, low and tired.

"We've made it this far," I said. "Iran. Turkey. Greece. Italy. France. The English Channel."

Samim nodded. "We just have to make it a little further."

3

Find Me on the Other Side?

Hours later, a scream woke us from sleep. "The boat is leaking! We are sinking!"

Voices rose all around us. People shouting, crying and cursing.

I looked down and saw that my feet were underwater, so numb I couldn't feel them. The sea had sneaked inside the boat.

"We are going to drown!" someone screamed, and the cries got louder.

Two little girls in front of us buried their heads in their mother's chest, the woman who gave us the precious apple slices, and she hugged them tight. I watched them, my throat closing, wishing I had *my* mother to hug me too. Just one more time.

"Calm down, everyone! I'm calling for help!" the man by the tiller shouted. His hands shook as he pressed buttons on the satellite phone. He yelled into it, voice cracking.

I didn't understand much English back then, but I understood enough.

English Channel.

Please.

Mercy.

I kicked off my shoes and used them to scoop out water. Samim did the same, and soon others joined with bottles and hands. We bailed and bailed, and the boat swayed and swayed.

Suddenly, Samim's ice-cold hand gripped my arm. I turned to him, and his eyes were huge, full of fear.

"My life jacket, Zayn. It's broken!"

I dropped my shoe and reached for his jacket.

My fingers fumbled with the straps, and then I froze. It was deflated. There was no way it would keep him afloat if the boat sank.

My chest filled up with rocks again, heavy and tight, and I gulped for air.

"What do I do, Zayn? What do I do?" Samim stared me in the eye.

"You'll wear mine instead," I said, already unfastening my jacket.

Samim sat still before me, his face grey as dust. "No. I can't…"

"Just do it!" I reached for his straps, but he pushed my hands away.

"I can't, Zayn. I won't! What about you?"

"I'm a better swimmer. I'll be fine!"

Then came another shout. "The engine stopped! We're sinking!"

Everyone froze for a moment, and we listened.

No hum. No buzz. Just the splash of water.

And then the cries returned.

"Just take that thing off, you melon-head!" I shouted, yanking at Samim's useless life jacket. "Take it off!"

Finally, he took it off and put mine on. His eyes were huge with fear.

"I'll be fine," I said, even though my voice shook. I squeezed his shoulder and tried to smile, but inside, my heart was thudding so hard it hurt. It wasn't long until the rubber floor beneath us sagged and folded. Seawater gushed in from the edges, and just like that, our boat was gone.

The cold water felt like fire against my skin. It burned and numbed at the same time. I flapped my arms and kicked my legs, trying to stay afloat, but my limbs felt wooden, heavy and slow, as if I was swimming through glue.

"Hold on to me, Zayn! Hold on to me!" Samim grabbed my arm.

I held on to him and wheezed through my purple lips, "When I grow up, I'm going to live in a desert."

"I'm sorry, Zayn!" Samim cried. "I'm sorry I made you leave Italy! We should've stayed, and you would've been safe. I'm sorry!"

I shook my head. "N-no way. I go where you go. And anyway… Italy was getting b-boring. And all that p-pizza with h-hot cheese… It was making us fat…" My teeth chattered.

Samim let out a small laugh, but then his eyes became desperate.

"Are we going to die, Zayn?"

I wanted to crack another joke, say no, call him a melon-head, but my tongue was too cold for long sentences, and I didn't know how much time we had left… I didn't want my last words to my brother to be a lie, so I told him the truth.

"P-probably."

Samim's bottom lip trembled, and I wished I'd lied to him instead.

"Do you think it will be painful, Zayn?"

This was my chance to make it better. "N-no." I shook my head. "It will be nice. Like drinking s-sweet tea by the f-fire."

Samim smiled, and something in his face changed, as if both fear and cold had suddenly slipped away. His voice was soft now and steady. "Find me on the other side?"

Our eyes locked.

I took a deep breath and forced my words to be strong: "In heaven or hell."

‘A must-read story of courage and bravery beyond imagination.’

– Christine Pillainayagam, author of *Ellie Pillai is Brown*

My name is Zayn.

I’m thirteen, I’m obsessed with football – and I’m a refugee.

After surviving the dangerous journey from Afghanistan to the UK, I swore I’d stay out of trouble. But my best friend Samim has vanished, and now my roommate is missing too.

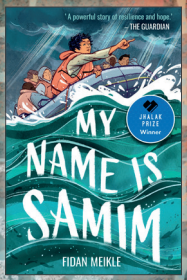
I won’t stop until I find them. Even if it means walking straight into the jaws of trouble.

This is my story. Are you ready for it?

★

‘ Fidan Meikle’s books have the power to change minds and open hearts.’

– Sita Brahmachari, author of *Artichoke Hearts*



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