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Opening extract from

Abela

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1

Abela

The priest arrived on a red motorbike. Dust rose like smoke around him as he roared into the village. Already the villagers were strolling towards the church, which was built like a barn on wooden supports. The sides were open, and swallows and children swooped and tumbled in and out. Abela had been one of the first to arrive, carrying her baby sister on her hip, the child's skinny arms looped round her neck. She was too big to be carried really, and Abela was too small to be carrying her. When she found her seat she lowered her sister on to the sandy ground and shook her shoulders to ease them. Nyota could walk now, but wouldn't. She sat gazing listlessly up at Abela, sometimes whimpering to herself, sometimes completely silent. The music and singing might distract her for a while, or might send her off to sleep. She was poorly, Abela knew that. There were many poorly babies in the village. Her grandmother, Bibi, told her there was no hope for any of them.

One of Abela's neighbours squeezed along the row to sit next to her. 'Where's your mama?' she asked. She had to shout over the noise of chattering and bird cries in the church.

'Mama's tired,' Abela said.

'She poorly too?' The neighbour clicked her tongue and shifted herself round in her creaking seat.

Abela turned her head away and watched the priest. She had nothing to say. Mama was sick. The baby was dying. Baba was dead. What was there to say?

The priest was unlocking the pannier of his motor-bike. He brought out a green carrier bag and took out his altar vestments, his long white robe, his gorgeous red embroidered chasuble and stole. He slipped them over his jeans and Tee shirt and tucked his white collar into place. Then he walked into church carrying a tin of dried milk powder, which he placed on the altar table. He turned to face the congregation, and lifted his arms wide so his robes unfolded like wings around him. The chattering stopped. He began to sing, and immediately everyone joined in, fitting harmonies round his deep rich voice. The hymn was like a river flowing with currents of different colours. Abela always thought the sound she made when she was singing was yellow, golden-yellow like corn. Mama's was a pretty shivering blue. And Baba's – her father's – Baba's used to be brown. But Baba's voice would never be heard again.

'Please, please don't let Mama die too. Don't let Nyota die. Don't. Don't.'

If God listened to songs, he would surely hear hers, he would see the golden stream of her voice and listen to the words that floated inside it. And now the singing had stopped, and the priest was telling them that they must pray together for the dead and the dying and the sick.

Abela knew that the prayer was for just about everybody who wasn't in the church at that moment, and even for some people who were. Sickness stalked the village like a hyena, ears pricked, fangs dripping, sparing no family.

On the day Baba died, Mama had shaved her head to show she was in mourning for her husband. She sat outside their mud hut and all their belongings were brought out – their bedrolls, the cooking pots, the blankets and baskets. Her husband's younger brother moved into the hut, because he was nearly a man now, too old to be sharing a hut with his parents and his sisters.

On that terrible day of sadness Mama and Abela and the baby Nyota had sat in the baking sun waiting for someone to give them a home. With the help of her sisters, Mama had built the hut just before her marriage, slapping the wet red mud with her hands to shape it, piling the straw thatch onto the roof. When it leaked, she had smoothed mud over the cracks, smearing it to fill up the holes. Mama had dug the garden, their little shamba, and planted it with vegetables. She had spread out the beans to dry in the sun, she had pounded the maize to make flour, she had carried it to market in a banana leaf basket on her head. Even when Baba was ill she had done this, even when he was dying in the hospital. And when he died, they had been forced to give up their home and their shamba.

At last Mama's mother, the grandmother Bibi, had come to fetch them to her own house in the next village.

'One day soon,' Bibi had said, 'the hyena will come

for me, and this will be your home. And the field that goes with it,' she added, gazing out at the little strip of land that was their family's only wealth. 'Your brother won't want it, now he's in England-Europe.'

The priest used the key of his motorbike to prise open the lid of the dried milk tin, and brought out of it the discs of unleavened wafer bread. By the mystery of his prayers the bread would become the body of Christ. Abela knew that was so, even though it still looked like bread, and was so fine and light that it melted on her tongue and clung to the roof of her mouth.

'Lamb of God,' the priest said, 'Who takest away the sins of the world...'

The rainbow river of song poured through the church again, and the rich loud sound of it filled Abela with hope. God would hear it and make Mama well. Her golden voice shimmered all the way to heaven. Of course Mama wouldn't die.

The priest bowed and walked out of the church, with his powdered milk tin tucked under his arm. Outside the church he rolled up his gorgeous vestments in the carrier bag and returned them to the pannier. He swung his leg over the motorbike and turned the key. The bike roared into life, sputtering a cloud of smoke. Laughing children scattered away from him like dusty sparrows as he swerved round them and away to visit his next parish. Long ago, when he was a child, he had been one of the red-robed nomad children of the Maasai Plain, but that

was before the Jesuits had given him an education and priesthood and called him John, after a saint, instead of by his tribal name. He had never been back to his tribe since his ordination.

We have a game, Mama and I, when we pound maize. When the corncobs have been drying in the sun for long enough, we shake off all the little yellow buds into a heap, and we pour them into a basket. They go tchick, tchick, as they trickle down. Then we grind the buds into flour. We pound it with the end of a long stick from a tree, which is just as tall as Mama. It takes so long that our legs ache and ache with standing and our arms are heavy with holding the branch and stamping it down again and again. We must do it for hours, every day when the corn is ripe, to make enough for our food, to make enough to sell. The sky is greasy and sweaty. Flies buzz round my face and walk on my skin, and because my hands are busy I can't brush them away. They crawl in my hair and I can't do anything about them. My head throbs and I'm thirsty and tired.

This is when the game starts. Just when I think I can't do any more, Mama shouts, 'One, Abela!' She raises her branch and then she lets go of it and she claps her hands before she catches it again. I do the same. It's hard to keep the pounding rhythm going. *Pound lift drop clap catch pound lift drop clap catch.* Mama sings while we're doing it. When we've got a nice smooth rhythm going she shouts, 'Two, Abela!' She lets go of her

branch and claps twice before she catches it again. *Pound lift drop clap-clap catch pound lift drop clap-clap*... My face is twisted with concentration and my hands are so sweaty that the branch slides through them. Mama is singing and my chest is tight with wanting to laugh. The rhythm flows, smooth as a dance, and then Mama shouts, 'Three, Abela!' But it's impossible. We bend over with laughter, it hiccups out of me like the little yellow buds of corn, and Mama's laughter peals out like pretty bells, blue and shivery and sweet. And when we look down, the flour is made.

But we don't play that game now. Mama doesn't stand with me while I'm pounding corn. She lies in the cool darkness of Bibi's hut, and she doesn't laugh any more.

I am not afraid of anything. I am not afraid of the mad mzee who comes down to the market sometimes. She is not like my grandmother mzee, Bibi. She is like a wounded animal. We don't have a proper stall in the market, under the shade of the thatch, because we are too poor. We spread a cotton kanga on the ground and sit on it, and Mama and I make little heaps of the things we have brought to sell; red beans sometimes, or yellow cobs of corn, or oranges that a neighbour has swopped with us. If we have been given green bananas we lay them out in a bunch, like the fingers of a hand. If we sell enough to buy some other food from someone else, we are happy.

But then the mad mzee comes hobbling round the

stalls with her panga tucked under her arm. This panga is a very sharp curved blade that is used for cutting down the corn. My father once told me that he had seen a man slice another man's head clean off his neck with a panga, because he had tried to steal his cow. And the mad mzee comes with her panga, muttering and grumbling and staring at people, and if she thinks you are a stranger or you are laughing at her, or she doesn't like your face that day, she waves her panga in the air and lurches towards you. I'm not afraid when she chooses me, because I can run, and she can only stamp her feet on the ground and stumble forward a few paces. I can run to the chilli-seller's stall and hide under it, and when the mad mzee finds me she bends down shrieking and wallering, and I see the blade like a silver tongue sipping the air for me. I can back away and shimmy under the next stall.

In the end she forgets me and chases another child or the white lady teacher Mrs Long, until somebody holds out a cigarette to her. This is what she wants. She tucks the cigarette behind her ear and shuffles away home, and the gossiping in the market starts again, and somebody puts on the tape of Mister Bing Crosby singing 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas,' which we all love so much. No, I'm not afraid of the mad mzee.

And I'm not afraid of the lion. Simba. The lions live up in the purple mountains and they never come down to the village in the daytime. At night we sometimes hear the maize crinkling as they step through it, and we lie in the darkness with our breath as soft as moths, and

my mama's hand creeps out to me and closes over mine. But Simba won't come into our hut, and we won't go out in the darkness of the night, so I'm not afraid of him.

I know how to kill a lion. My baba told me that when he was a boy he saw Maasai men killing a lion who attacked their cattle. It takes four men to kill a lion, Baba said. One dances in front, to lead him away to a safe place. One dances behind to grab his tail when he springs. And when it is safe, the other two men stab him with their spears, one each side. Then the Maasai men leap in the air and holler *lu-a-lu-a-lu-a-lu,* because their cattle are safe again. But nobody wants to kill Simba, Baba told me. He is beautiful, with his golden coat and his black mane. He is huge and proud and silent and strong, and he belongs to the lion world, not the man world. So I'm not afraid of the lion.

I am not afraid of the little monkeys who drop down on me from the trees and squeal and jabber down my ear and pull my hair with their tight little fists. They snatch food from my hands and gobble it up. I hate them sometimes, but I'm not afraid of them.

I have never been afraid of anything till now. Now I'm afraid that my mama is going to die.

2

Rosa

Far, far away from Africa, in a northern England city called Sheffield, it was beginning to snow. It came in such a short, sharp flurry that it was over before a lot of people knew it had started, but when they looked out of the window or left their offices and schools to catch the bus home, they found a white layer covering everything, softening all the sharp angles of the buildings, making the pavements slithery. It was not enough yet to make the city beautiful, or to bring the traffic to a halt. It just made everyone want to get home as quickly as they could.

The man who stood outside the Central Library every day selling copies of the *Big Issue* stamped his feet to try and keep himself warm. If he sold one more copy before it was dark, he decided, he would have earned himself a polystyrene mug of hot coffee from Zooby's in the Millennium Gardens over the road.

'Who'll buy my last copy?' he shouted. It was a little lie; he had ten more copies inside his coat, but it usually did the trick. A young woman came down the library steps, tucking her hair inside the collar of her coat, and took out her purse immediately. 'It's not very nice for you today, is it?' she said, taking the magazine from him.

'I don't want the change, thanks.' Her breath smoked away from her.

'Thanks a lot. Enjoy the snow,' the man said, and the woman hurried away into the warmth of Marks & Spencer's, where she bought a chocolate cake for her daughter's birthday tea, and then ran to catch the supertram home. She arrived outside the school at the same time as Rosa. She often did this. She wouldn't let Rosa walk through the park on her own on dark nights. If she wasn't there, Rosa had to walk the long way round, past the shopping centre and the boys' school. The park was much quicker.

'What have you got there?' Rosa asked her.

'Nothing,' her mother said, and kissed her. 'Snow on your birthday! You spoilt brat!'

They walked deliberately across the grass as they crossed the park, making their footsteps the first in the snow. By the time they reached their house it was turning to sleet. 'We've had the best of it,' Rosa's mother said. 'It'll all be gone by tomorrow.'

'Ah,' said Rosa. 'I want it to snow all night! I wanted a day off school!'

They scurried down the echoey entry and through the back door, and Rosa immediately ran through the kitchen and the living room to see if any cards had arrived for her. There were two, from her uncles and aunts. 'To our darling Rosa,' one of them said. 'Have a wonderful wonderful birthday, Aunty Sarah and Uncle Robert.' There was a twenty-pound note inside.

'Ey up Duck,' the other one said. 'Have a cracking time. Lisa and Nigel' with a hand-drawn picture of a duck looking at an egg. There would be a book from them next time she saw them; there always was. She would devour it in one night, and then read it again and again.

Mum was standing in the kitchen, leafing through the *Big Issue* that she had bought in town. She opened it at a particular page and smoothed the spine down to keep it open there. She laid it flat on the table. Rosa glanced at it. It showed a picture of black children in a dusty compound. *A Desperate Situation*, the headline read. Twitchy jumped on top of the magazine and mewed plaintively to remind her it was food time.

'I got two cards,' Rosa said. 'And twenty pounds, Mum! *Twenty!*' She paused. 'And – ahem?'

'Nana and Grandpa will be bringing something,' Mum smiled. 'Help me clear up, love. They'll be here soon. I hope this snow doesn't hold them up.'

'What are we having?' Rosa asked.

'Guess.'

'Sausage surprise?'

'Got it in one.'

Rosa scrambled round the living room, hiding shoes under the settee and straightening up the heap of books by the coffee table. She pulled shut the yellow curtains and twitched them into shape, straightened the tartan blanket that covered up the threadbare patches that Twitchy had scratched into the armchair, then ran upstairs with her school bag.

'What shall I wear, what shall I wear?' she shouted.

'Something gorgeous!' her mother shouted back. 'Quick! They're here.'

Rosa was giggling with excitement. She opened her wardrobe door and clicked the clothes hangers along the rail one by one – blue dress, no, yellow skirt, no, brown skirt, no, green cords, no, blue jeans! She pulled out her new jeans with the flowery patch pockets and a red polo-necked sweater, wriggled out of her school uniform, and she was dressed and down the stairs before Nana and Grandpa came through the door. Grandpa lifted her off the ground and squeezed her against him like a cushion. His clothes and his beard were wet with sprinkles of snow.

'I can only just do that now!' he laughed. 'You're nearly a giant. Anyone would think you were thirteen years old.'

'I am! I am!' Rosa shouted, leaning back and pretending to batter him with her fists. 'Put me down, you monster!'

'Calm down,' Nana said. 'You're a young lady now, Rosa.' She opened up her carrier bag and brought out a present wrapped, as always, in Christmas paper. Nana never saw the point of buying special birthday paper, at any time of the year. Rosa looked at her mum excitedly. Was it, could it be, the present she had dreamed of? She tore open the paper, opened the box, and screamed with joy. It was. It was a pair of ice skates.

*

I love skating, more than anything else in the world. Mum and I are learning together. We go to the skating rink every Saturday morning, and we are in the same class. We're just about as good as each other. I can go backwards, I can spin, I can do cross-overs. I love the music, which makes me want to dance and sing, and the sounds of the skates *freeshing* on the ice. I love the excitement I feel when I try a new move, and try and try again because it's too hard at first, and then find out I can do it. Most of all, I love it because it's something my mum and I do together.

It was my idea. I was off school with a sore throat last winter and Mum let me sit by the fire with the tartan blanket round my shoulders, and watch daytime TV. It was the European Games, and I watched a girl of about fourteen doing figure skating. She looked so quick and graceful and neat, like a little bird, and I thought, I want to do that.

'What d'you think, Mum?' I asked her. 'I really, really want to learn to skate. D'you think I could?'

And Mum put her arms round me. 'If you really want to do it, you can,' she said. 'And do you know, Rosa, it's something I've always wanted to do, too. We could have lessons together, if you don't mind me falling over every five minutes and making a fool of myself.'

So we started having lessons, and to our surprise Mum turned out to be quite good at it, and so did I. We wouldn't miss our Saturday skating lesson for anything. Since we started ice-skating we've got into the habit of

having to do particular things each time we go, a set of traditions like a sort of good luck charm. The first is that we always travel to Ice Sheffield on the supertram. The car won't do, because Mum doesn't believe in using a car when you can get there by public transport. The bus won't do, because the roads are so busy it might make us late. And the tram is perfect, because it glides so smoothly and quietly you could believe it was on skates and saying, 'Look at me! I can do it too!'

The best part of the journey is when we climb out of Sheffield centre, away from Pond's Forge and the big swimming pool with its see-through flume tunnels. Then the tram is soaring uphill, gliding us away from the city, and we're looking down on the shining canal and the smart hotel complex far below us. We're sky-skating. Mum and I smack our hands together and say, 'Yes! We're off!'

When we arrive at the Arena stop, I race Mum up the track to Ice Sheffield – I always beat her and have to wait at the door. Then she has to wait for me while I get my hire boots – I always sniff inside them to make sure they're not too sweaty from the last wearer, and then she has to lace them up for me because I can never get them quite tight enough; I'm too impatient. She has her own boots because her feet have stopped growing. She bought them on eBay, and they look about a hundred years old. Even the blades are a bit rusty, but she says that gives them character. She can lace them up in seconds while I'm hopping about. Then she takes off her

purple skate guards and we hobble towards the ice. Just before we step on, she squeezes my hand.

'Don't...' she says.

'Break...' I say.

'Anything!' we both say, and then we're off, skating as fast as we can round the rink, and we lose each other because we're in a tide of people, all swaying and gliding, drifting, dancing. It's like the river swim at Pond's Forge; you just have to go with the current, leaning into the bends like a cyclist, round and round, swift and sure, a swarm of coloured fish. I know some of the people who come to coaching every Saturday, and we shout to each other as we pass. Mum's friend Pat swoops up to us and they swing along side by side, gossiping about growing beans or treating poorly cats or playing fiddle. Pat's son Jamie is my age. He skates faster than anyone, head down, knees bent, lapping us all. His little brother Toby does his best to keep up, and his cheeks glow like red roses with the effort. And then there's Paige, who skates like a ballet dancer, her arms willowy and her back straight and her head proud and high. Her hair is tied back in a pink band, and she wears a short pink skirt that flounces out when she turns; her skates have matching pink heels. I try to copy Paige, lifting my arms away from my sides like wings, but she looks like a swan floating across the water, and I look like a waddling duck, I just know it. I never even take my coat and hat and gloves off because it's too cold.

Our coaches call us into our groups and for the next

forty minutes we have to work hard, going backwards and forwards across the rink, swirling, making lemon shapes with our feet, scissoring, turning, weaving, going down on one knee and gliding up again. It's really difficult. I don't have time to look at anyone then, I just so much want to get it right. I'm only aware of one thing, and that's my ice shadow. She goes everywhere with me, turns with me, glides under my skates and comes round the other side. I know I shouldn't watch her because my eyes are supposed to be looking straight ahead, but it's like having a sister, a twin, my black self with me all the time.

When the coaching finishes the music comes on, and we're all grace and speed, all swans now, every one of us, floating free as air because we don't have to concentrate any more. We're all that little bit better than we were forty minutes ago. Paige floats towards me and away, backwards, and round, and away. I can hear Jamie stamping his skates on the ice, trying something new, scraping the pick, which is the little serrated bit at the tip of the blade, then he dashes past me, turns his head to grin at me, and tumbles over. He's up in the same movement, and his clothes sparkle with ice dust. Scrape, scrape, go Toby's blades; I can hear his sharp breaths, desperate to keep up. Then Mum's next to me, holding out her hand, and we glide round together. We both gasp and laugh out loud with the fun of it. Everything seems to fall away from us; all the skaters and the watchers and the coaches, it's just me and Mum, holding hands and looking at each other and laughing, ready to fly.

The thing about Mum is – I can't say this to her, I can't really say this to anybody, because it sounds a bit silly – but, well, I think she's my best friend. And that's why the skating, learning together and having fun together and holding hands and swinging each other round – that's why it's my favourite thing.

When the public come on we hobble off the ice, ducks again, and totter over to one of the tables at the rink side. This is another tradition. Mum has some coffee from her flask and I have a muesli bar, and we sit for a bit and watch the skaters. It's exciting watching the rush and swirl of all the coloured swans with their black shadows. There's a patch of sunlight coming through one of the high windows, and it makes a window shape on the ice. When people skate through it they turn briefly golden. Paige pauses in the centre of it and lifts her arms high, like a golden bird.

'We've passed to level nine today,' Mum told me one day, just before my birthday. 'We've got to decide what to do when we finish that. Figure skating or ice hockey.'

'Do we have to choose?' I asked her.

'If we still want coaching, we do.'

'Figure skating.'

'That's fine.' Mum poured herself another coffee. 'I'm thinking of doing ice hockey with Jamie.'

I stared at her. I couldn't believe it. This is what *we* do together; this is our special thing.

An Asian family stumbled past, one by one, just the other side of the barrier. They were all clinging onto the

bar with both hands, frowning with concentration. One of the boys dared to lift his hand away and disappeared completely, his feet slithering away in all directions.

I sniggered.

'That was us, twelve months ago,' Mum reminded me. 'We've done it, Rosa! We can skate! It just shows, if you really want to do something, if you really work at it, you can do it. Never forget that, will you?' She screwed the lid back on her flask. 'Back to the ice? Fifteen more minutes, then we'll have to catch the tram.'

I heard her, but I didn't move. I was watching Jamie, head down, charging round the rink as if all the bears in the woods were chasing him. Then down he went. Splat!

And not long after that, Mum told me about the adoption child.

We were on the supertram, on the way to Ice Sheffield for a public session. I shifted round in my seat to watch Sheffield slip away from us as we swooped up from Fitzalan Square, then I lifted my hand up for the hand slap and the 'Yes! We're off!' Mum didn't respond. She'd forgotten all about our tradition. I had noticed that she was behaving a bit oddly that Saturday morning. It was a bit like our first morning of skating; she seemed tense and nervous, locked inside herself. Looking back, I think she'd been a bit strange all week, making private phone calls from her room and saying she had meetings to go to in town as soon as she left me at school. She seemed to be happy and worried all at the same time;

and at last, that Saturday morning, she told me what was going on. She moved across from the seat facing me so she was sitting next to me, and said,

'Rosa, I've got something very special to ask you. How would you like to have a sister?'

I nearly burst with surprise and excitement. 'Mum! Really? Oh, cool! Are you going to have a baby?'

She shook her head, smiling. 'You're pleased, aren't you? But no, I'm not having a baby. I'm thinking of adopting a little girl.'

That was how she broke it to me.

'What do you think? What do you think, Rosa?'

What was I supposed to think? I said nothing, nothing at all. How could I say anything, there on the tram, or anywhere, how could I tell her how I felt? I didn't want an adopted sister. I didn't really want another child in our house at all. A baby was one thing, I could play with it and take it out in the pram. It might even look like me. But an adopted sister? What if I had said to her, 'I'm thinking of adopting a mother?' How would she have felt? Inside my head I was screaming. If I opened my mouth, all that would have come out would have been a scream.

She kept on talking to me but I wouldn't answer, She kept on and on, pouring words into my ears, words that I didn't understand and didn't want to hear and didn't have any answer to.

'I've always wanted a sister for you,' she said.

Scream, scream, scream inside my head, like the

whistle of a train as it dives into the tunnel.

'I never wanted you to be an only child, Rosa. We'd be a real family,' she said. 'What do you think, Rosa?'

I turned my face away from her and stared at my reflection in the window. Mum couldn't talk now, there were some kids opposite us talking and laughing noisily. She tried to hold my hand instead. I balled it up into a fist. She stroked the fist. She lifted my balled fist up and kissed it, and in my reflection I saw my eyes glisten with tears.

When we came out of the tram, the sun was blinding. Mum started chatting about whether we'd be able to do the lemon skating move without falling over today, where we have to bow our legs in and out.

'Now that we've passed level nine, you might be ready to have your own pair of skating boots, instead of using hired ones. I was wondering about getting some for your birthday. Shall we go and look at some today? You could try them on, and we can find out how much they're likely to cost.'

My own boots! I felt as if I had woken up from a bad dream. I watched her face, but that worried look had gone; she was smiling and chatting and promising me any colour boots I wanted provided I made sure my feet wouldn't grow one more centimetre from one birthday to the next. At last I trusted myself to look at her again. Maybe she wasn't going to mention this adoption business again. Maybe she'd forgotten all about it; and so would I. Maybe she'd realised that she had made a

terrible mistake. And when we went into the shop at the ice rink and tried on the new boots, and found a pair, a pink pair with red heels, the most beautiful boots in the shop – then, at last, I allowed myself to smile at her again. In fact, I felt as if my cheeks might burst.

Mum screwed up her face when she saw the price.

'What d'you think?' I asked anxiously. I couldn't help clutching the boots to my chest and stroking them, as if they were a pet rabbit.

'I think Nana and Grandpa might chip in,' Mum smiled, and squeezed my hand. She asked the assistant if we could take the catalogue home with us, so I could look at the picture of them every day until I really owned them.

And that's today, my thirteenth birthday, the day of the glittering snow.