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Where I Belong

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Abdi

'Spin the globe,' my father used to say. 'Good. Now give me your finger.'

He'd hold it high in the air and then, as the globe slowed and the blurring countries started to separate, suddenly he would—STAB!

And he never failed. Every time, as the world screeched to a stop, my finger was slap bang on the Horn of Africa. Right at the point, where letters ran round the coast.

SOMALIA.

'There!' my father would say. 'That's where you belong.'

I'd look down at the jagged, angled shape and think of warlords and pirates. Kids strolling down the streets, with AK47s over their shoulders. Battle wagons with sub-machine guns mounted in the back, and men haggling over ammunition at the arms market in Mogadishu.

You need to be strong to survive in a place like that.

You need a good family to back you up, and a pride in your own identity. And Somalis are known for those things—even here. People see how we stand up for each other at school and they say, *Don't hassle him. He's one of the Somali kids.*

That's rooted deep inside me. Every time I look at a globe, every time I read the name of my country or see it on a map, it gives me a feeling I can't describe. I think, *That's me. That's where I belong.*

My father showed me the way there, dozens of times, holding my finger and tracing out the routes on the globe. *Fly to Dubai or Djibouti. And then take a plane straight into Somalia.* It's easy. People do it all the time, in spite of the danger and the guns. Somalis from all over the world go back to visit their families.

But not me. I've never been there.

I was born in the Netherlands. That's where my mother ran to, when things turned nasty in Somalia. And, believe me, they turned *very* nasty.

First there was a dictator, who favoured his own clan, Maamo says. He held down all the other—until Western countries began to play games with the Horn of Africa. Then everything fell to pieces.

And the warlords took over.

What was it like then? Well, imagine living in the middle of a computer game—only it's real. That's how I visualize it, anyway. All the buildings bombed to pieces, grenades exploding every time you walk down the street and machine gun bullets ripping into anyone who gets in the way. Maamo says there was violence everywhere. And corruption. And chaos.

She was pregnant with me then, and my father was desperate to get her away somewhere safe. But his parents were old and sick and he couldn't leave them. So Maamo went abroad by herself, as a refugee. And my father promised to come and fetch her home when the country settled down.

Only it didn't settle down.

My father never lived with us while I was growing up. When I was small, he used to come and visit, filling the whole house with life and energy. He was always full of games and he loved telling stories. Sometimes they were old Somali folk tales and I liked hearing those, but my favourites were about the tricks he and his best friend Suliman Osman played when they were young.

We never knew when to expect him. I'd just wake up one morning and find him there, grinning down as I opened my eyes. When I try to remember those visits now, they all merge into one. I see his face and I scream with delight as he scoops me out of bed. Then

he throws me up in the air, three, four, five times, catching me in his great strong hands.

'You haven't grown!' he says. Teasing me. 'I thought you'd be big enough to look after Maamo by now, but you're still tiny!'

'No I'm not!' I shriek. 'Measure me! Measure me, Abbo!'

I wriggle out of his arms and slide to the ground, dragging him across to the wall where he marks my height. The pencil lines go up like the rungs of a ladder, one for each time he visits.

Once there were only marks for me, but now there are three ladders next to mine, for my three younger sisters. Fowsia first, then Maryan, then Sahra. But my ladder's the longest, and it goes up very fast. That makes me really happy, because I can't wait to be as tall as my father. He's marked his own height on the wall, so I can see where I'm heading.

Am I near that mark now?

I'll never know, because we don't live there any more. When I was ten, we moved to England—and my father stopped visiting us.

He still kept in touch, though. He'd sent us to the place where Suliman Osman and his family were living, with lots of other Somalis. A part of London called Battle Hill. Suliman was busy opening up a string of internet cafés round there, and every week I

went to the one nearest to our flat. There was always an email waiting for me. Hi, Abdi! How are things going? That was good news about the football match . . . He always remembered what I was doing, and what I cared about. And he always ended the same way. Keep looking after Maamo and your sisters, until I come and see you again. I'm proud of you. Abbo.

But he never did come.

'He still loves us,' said Maamo. 'It's just that things are harder now. He can't keep travelling backwards and forwards the way he used to. We have to save lots of money to bring him here and then he'll stay for ever—until we go home to Somalia.'

It was because of saving the money that I had to read my emails in Suliman Osman's café. We couldn't afford to buy our own computer, because we needed every penny to bring Abbo to England.

Each Sunday, Maamo and I would sit down and count up what we'd managed to save that week, piling up coins in neat little heaps on the kitchen table. I wrote down the amount in a notebook and added up the total and on Monday morning Maamo took the money round to Uncle Osman Hersi's house, so that he could keep it safe. We did that every Sunday, for three years.

Then, when I was thirteen, we finally had enough, and Uncle Osman came round to tell us it had all been

sent off to my father. When he left, Maamo danced round the kitchen, singing Somali songs.

We thought Abbo would email us, of course, to say when he was coming, but we didn't hear from him. In fact, his emails stopped altogether. One week there was the usual message, full of news and questions and funny little stories and jokes. And then—nothing.

I checked my inbox every day, at school, and in the evening I went into the café, to check again. Suliman must have guessed why I kept coming. For a while, he told his manager to give me ten minutes a day free of charge. And that was all I needed—unless I had homework to do—because the message I wanted was never there.

At first, Maamo tried to find out what had happened. Her question went all round the world, passed on from one Somali to another. *Where is Ahmed Mussa Ali?* But no one seemed to have an answer.

And then one day I walked in from school and she told me he was dead.

She didn't make any attempt to prepare me. Just said the bare words. 'Your father's dead.'

When I asked the obvious questions, like when and where—and *who*—her face went blank, as if the story was too painful to tell. She just refused to talk about it.

After that, when I tried to picture my father's face,

he was always saying the same thing. Keep looking after Maamo and your sisters, until I come and see you again. I'm proud of you . . . And I felt it come down on my shoulders, like a heavy weight.

About six months later, I came home from school and found visitors in the flat. Suliman's father, Uncle Osman, was there, with his wife, Auntie Safia. They were sitting in the front room, drinking tea with Maamo. The flat was very tidy and quiet and there was no sign of my sisters.

Maamo poured me a cup of tea and nodded at the sofa, meaning that I should sit next to Uncle Osman. She and Auntie Safia went on talking and Uncle Osman smiled at me.

'You're doing very well,' he said. 'Your sisters are growing up into good, sensible girls.' I glanced round the flat, wondering where they were and he smiled at me again. 'They've gone to visit my daughters.'

He and Auntie Safia had only one son—Suliman—but they had three daughters, all older than me. We used to see the daughters a lot, when they helped in Auntie Safia's shop, but they were never in there now. They were all studying hard, for professional exams. If they'd taken time off, to mind my little sisters, it could only mean one thing.

Uncle Osman had come round to say something important.

He watched me thinking about it. Then he said, quietly, 'Of course, if you had an older sister, she would be able to keep an eye on Fowsia and Sahra and Maryan. Girls need an older sister when they're growing up.'

Maamo and Auntie Safia stopped talking for a second. When they went on, I could tell they weren't really listening to each other. They both wanted to hear how I was going to answer Uncle Osman. That was the point of this visit.

'Older sisters don't come out of nowhere,' I said.

Uncle Osman studied my face. Then he said, very carefully, 'There's a man in Somalia—a good, hard-working man—who wants his daughter to come to Britain for her education. But he has no relations here to give her a home. He's asked me to find a good family who'll treat her like a daughter—or a sister.'

They were all staring at me now. The three of them must have discussed it already, without me, but it felt as though the decision was mine. As though they were waiting for my permission.

'How old is this girl?' I said.

Uncle Osman shrugged. 'Maybe—fourteen?'

That probably meant she was older. I don't know much about how these things work, but I know that

younger is better, because it gives more time for education. And they give you money for longer.

'Who is she?' I said. 'What family is she from?'

Uncle Osman frowned, very faintly. 'It's not good to make divisions like that. Her name is Khadija, and she's your sister. We are all one family now. Your father understood that.'

How could I refuse then? He hadn't chosen us to look after this unknown girl just because we needed the money. He'd chosen us because he knew we were the right kind of people. The wife and children of Ahmed Mussa Ali.

'So what's your answer?' Uncle Osman said.

I lifted my head and looked him in the eyes. 'She can come,' I said. 'Tell her father we'll look after her.'

Khadija

When you say 'Somalia' to *me*, I think of rain on the red desert. Dust spattering up my leg and children screaming with joy as the first fat drops hit the ground. I think of camels lifting their heads, with their nostrils flaring wide. And the scent of the earth as seeds split open and sprout.

When the *gu* rains come, the whole world changes overnight, from red to green, from starvation land to new, fresh pasture. The thorn bushes bud, the trees spread their leaves, the animals start to fatten up again. It's as though everything's been holding its breath, like us, and suddenly all that breath is let out, in a great burst of life.

I never thought I would get to hate the rain.

My name is not Khadija. You need to know that, before you hear my story. Now I am famous, maybe

you think you know all about me, but you are mistaken. I am hidden from you, and everything you've heard is wrong.

My little brother Mahmoud calls me *Geri*—giraffe—because I have big eyes and my legs are very long. But that is not my name either. My real name lists my ancestors, going back for thirteen generations. If you heard it, you would know exactly who I am—if you're Somali.

But it may not be wise for me to tell you, so don't waste your time asking. Just listen.

When I was a little girl, my father was a rich man, with a big herd of camels and sheep and goats. He had houses too, and businesses, in Mogadishu and Beledweyne, and he travelled from one to the other and into the Ogaden. His second wife lived in Mogadishu, but we hardly ever saw her. I grew up with my sisters and my brother Mahmoud, moving around from pasture to pasture with my mother and our relations. It was a good life.

But then it changed, without any warning. Or, rather, there were warnings, but I was too innocent to know what they meant. Too trusting.

First, my father came out from Mogadishu and took away three of the camels. We knew he was going to sell them, but he didn't tell us what he was going to do with the money. They were his camels, after all.

And the rains had failed, so I thought he was selling them because of the drought.

Next time he came, he had a camera. My mother didn't like that. I saw her speaking sharply to him, but they were too far away for me to catch any of the words. And when he called to me, she walked off by herself.

He draped a sheet over the side of his car and made me sit in front of it while he took photographs of my face. When he took the first one, I smiled and waved my hand, but that made him shake his head.

'Just look straight at the camera,' he said. 'All I need is your face.'

Perhaps he's finding you a husband, Mahmoud said afterwards. Then he laughed at the expression on my face and I knew he was teasing me. He's too young to be serious about things like marriage. But I wondered whether he was right.

I never thought about passport photographs.

The third time my father came, it was almost dark when he arrived. He and my mother sat by the fire and talked for a long time. Mahmoud didn't say anything out loud, but he looked sideways at me and wiggled his eyebrows to make me laugh. When we went to sleep we could still hear our parents talking.

Next morning, I woke up and found that my mother had bundled up all my things in a piece of

cloth. There wasn't much to carry. When you spend your life travelling around, you only take things that are really important.

'You're going to your father's house in Mogadishu,' my mother said. 'Be a good girl and do what you're told.'

'What's happening? Why have I got to go?'

She patted my arm, smiling a narrow little smile. 'You'll know soon. It's a wonderful opportunity.'

Why wouldn't she tell me? I wanted to ask more questions, but there was no time. My father was calling me, and everyone was crowding round his car, waiting for me to get in. Mahmoud was sitting behind the steering wheel, pretending to drive, and Zainab and Sagal were watching me enviously. Mahmoud had been talking to them as well, and they thought there was a marriage in the air.

Everyone hugged me. Then my father turned Mahmoud out of the car and opened the door for me.

'Ready?' he said.

I lifted my head and looked straight back at him. 'Ready!' And I got in and sat down.

Once we were on the way, I tried to find out what was happening. First I dropped hints and then, when my father didn't react to those, I asked him straight out.

'Abbo, are you taking me away to be married?'

He looked startled. 'Who told you that?'

'No one *told* me. But Mahmoud thought—'

'Mahmoud?' My father started laughing. 'What a talented storyteller he is! Remember his song about the goat? *Hey, little she-goat, you are the fairest of all our goats. You are as lovely as a camel, little she-goat. All the he-camels are dying of love for you, little she-goat!*'

He was a good mimic, and sang it in a thin, high voice, like Mahmoud's. It was impossible not to laugh—but I hadn't forgotten my question. 'So, if I'm not going to be married, why are you taking me to Mogadishu?'

My father was silent for a moment. Then he said, 'You're not going to Mogadishu. You're going on a much longer journey.' He looked away from me. 'I've found a place for you in England.'

'*England?*' My voice came out as a croak, as though I was being strangled. 'Why are you sending me away? What have I done?'

'You haven't done anything. If you were a bad girl I wouldn't dare to send you. It's a wonderful opportunity. You'll get a good education—'

'I'm too old for *school*! And how will I understand what they say?'

'You'll have chances—'

'I don't want chances. I want to be here, with the rest of you—'

We argued all the way across the desert and out on to the highway. That's my only memory of the rest of that journey. Our voices going backwards and forwards and the desperation that closed me round, like the thorn fence that shuts in the animals at night.

When I think back, I wish I'd kept quiet and looked at the country instead. I shall never travel through the desert like that again—as someone who belongs there. That journey was the end of everything I knew before. But I didn't understand and so I went on shouting and arguing.

At last, my father stopped the car. He turned to look at me, interrupting my complaints. 'Enough,' he said. I could hear in his voice that he meant to be obeyed. 'We are going to meet someone now, and I don't want to be ashamed of you. You will behave quietly and do exactly as you're told. This is the man who will take you to England.'

He pulled out again and drove in silence, with his mouth set grimly and his eyes on the road. It was the first time I felt really afraid. I could see that he wasn't going to change his mind. This thing was really going to happen.

We met the smuggler just outside the town. He was sitting quietly by the road, smoking a cigarette. When

the car stopped, he put out his cigarette and stood up and my father told me to get out of the car.

'So this is Khadija,' the smuggler said.

I opened my mouth to tell him he was wrong and that wasn't my name, but he didn't wait for me to speak.

'Here's your passport,' he said.

He didn't give it to me. Just held it out so that I could see my photograph—the photo my father had taken in the desert—with the name written very clearly. *Khadija Ahmed Mussa*.

'That is who you are,' he said. 'I am your uncle, Guleed Mussa Ali, and I'm taking you to your family in England.'

What family?

My father got out of the car and put his arm round my shoulders. 'Listen to your uncle. Remember everything he tells you. If you don't get it exactly right, you could find yourself in trouble.'

The smuggler frowned at the bundle in my hands. 'What's that?' he said.

I couldn't understand why he was asking such a stupid question. 'They're the things I've brought with me.'

He scowled at my father. 'She can't take that on the plane. Have you got what I told you to buy?'

My father nodded. He opened the back door of the

car and took out a cheap travelling bag made of plastic. Before I could guess what he was going to do, he had snatched away my bundle—with everything I owned in the whole world. He threw it into the back of the car and put the bag down at my feet.

'Open it,' the smuggler said impatiently. 'You need to know what's inside.'

I undid the zip and peered in. There wasn't much. A few clothes, in dull colours, a little bag of washing things, and a headscarf. Not a big, bright Somali scarf, like the one I was wearing. Just a piece of thin, black material.

'You don't need many things,' my father said. 'You're going to a good family. They'll look after you.'

The smuggler waved his hand impatiently, telling me to pick up the bag. As I reached for the handle, he barked out a question. 'What's your name?'

I guessed he was trying to catch me out, but I was ready for him. 'I'm Khadija,' I said.

'Khadija what?'

'Khadija Ahmed Mussa.' That name was already fixed in my mind.

'And who am I?'

'You're Guleed Mussa Ali.'

'Guleed Mussa Ali—?'

For a moment I didn't understand what he meant.

But he and my father were both watching me, and I knew it was a test. 'Guleed Mussa Ali . . . ' I said slowly. And then I got it. 'Uncle. I must call you uncle.'

'Remember it,' he said. He didn't smile. 'Now pick up your bag and let's get going. It's time to find the boat.'

He started off down the road and I looked at my father, still hoping for a way out. But there wasn't one. My father shook his head at me.

'This is a good thing I'm doing for you,' he said. 'I've paid a lot of money to make sure you get to England. Don't waste it.'

'But I didn't ask you—'

He caught hold of my arms and looked down at me. '*Listen*,' he said. 'You can't do anything here. It's getting harder and harder for people like us, who travel around with our animals. Soon we'll have nothing left. If you go to England, you'll be able to help the whole family. And maybe, one day, you can come back and help Somalia too.'

A week ago, I'd been nothing but a girl minding goats, expecting to lead the same kind of life as my mother. I thought I would have a husband one day, and children to look after and teach. But now, suddenly, I was responsible for my whole family—and the destiny of my country too.

For a moment I was too frightened to answer my

father. But I knew he wouldn't change his mind. He'd chosen me for this task and I had to accept it. So I squared my shoulders and looked back into his eyes.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, I will.'

There was no time for anything else. The smuggler was already calling impatiently over his shoulder, worried that the boat would leave without us. My father patted my arm and then jumped back into his car, turning round quickly and driving off with his face set into a mask.

I picked up the plastic bag and walked down the road, to join the man who was taking me away.

He started by taking me to Kenya, in a boat. Those journeys are very dangerous, because the boats are always overloaded and the sea is full of sharks. Hundreds of people have died, horribly, trying to do what I was doing. But I didn't know that until much later. While we were on the sea, I had other things to worry about.

It was a little boat, and I was jammed in tightly, crushed among men I'd never seen before. It was the first time I had ever been in a boat, and Uncle didn't warn me that it would lurch and rock as the waves smashed against it. I was terrified, and I thought every moment that I was going to be sick.

To distract myself, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the things that Uncle had told me to learn, repeating them over and over in my head.

My name is Khadija Ahmed Mussa. I am thirteen years old. I'm going to England to join my mother and my brother and sisters. My sisters' names are Fowsia, Maryan, Sahra. Fowsia is eleven, Maryan is seven and Sahra is four. And my brother Abdi is fourteen.

I didn't try to imagine their faces or what they were like. They weren't people at all, just words that I had to learn. If I got the words wrong, I wouldn't be allowed into England and my father's money would be wasted.

My name is Khadija . . .

Those hours in the boat were the worst hours of my life. I survived by closing myself away from what was happening. And when we landed in Kenya, I truly felt like a different person.

What happened to me is called *hambaar*. Piggyback. Uncle was giving me a 'piggyback' to England in return for the money my father had paid. That was his business, and he did exactly what he'd promised. No more, no less.

Once we left the boat, we travelled by road and then by plane, and every time we went through a

checkpoint Uncle smiled at me kindly. That was part of his routine. When we were through, the smile was put away along with my passport and he ignored me again, even when we were sitting side by side.

I could have run away when we changed planes in Dubai. He showed me a seat in the airport and told me to sit there until he came back to collect me. But where would I have run to? I didn't know anything about that place and I had no passport except the one in Uncle's pocket. My father had paid for me to go to England and that was where I had to go. I sat on the seat, shivering in the air-conditioning, and I concentrated on repeating the same words inside my head. *My name is Khadija . . .*

When we landed in England, the sky was grey, and it was raining. Not clean, heavy rain, like the *gu*, but a steady, depressing drizzle. I didn't see how it was going to make anything grow, because everywhere I looked the ground was covered with concrete.

I felt hard and cold, like that concrete ground. If I hadn't, maybe everything would have happened differently. If I'd walked up to the checkpoints with my pulse racing and my eyes full of guilt, maybe the officials would have shut me out of England and sent me home. But inside I was stiff and silent. So they

looked at my face and then at my passport and let me into the country.

There were people from everywhere in the world on that train—all taking care not to look at each other. And the bus we took afterwards was just the same. Was the whole city like that? Thousands of people, all pretending that no one else was there?

We travelled through streets of tall, yellow-grey buildings, and all the time the useless rain went on falling. When I looked up at the sky, I couldn't see any sign of the sun. Was it always invisible here?

I thought Uncle would take me to my new family's house. I thought he would introduce me to Abdi and his sisters and present me to the woman who was supposed to be my mother. But what happened was very different.

When we got off the bus, he took some coins out of his pocket and gave them to me. 'Can you use a telephone?' he said.

I lifted my head. 'Of course I can!'

'You see the phone there?' He pointed down the road. 'Put this money into the slot, and phone the number I give you. Then stay in the phone box. The person who answers the phone will come and fetch you.'

I was too amazed to do anything except stare at him.

'Don't waste time,' he said impatiently. 'People will notice you. *Go!*' He pushed a little white card into my hand and gave me a push.

Slowly, I picked up my bag and began to walk down the road towards the telephone. When I was halfway there, I looked back over my shoulder. Uncle had already disappeared. The piggyback was over and I was walking on my own feet down this strange road.

The telephone was different from the phones I had used before, but it was easy to see how to use it. I pushed the money into the slot and pressed the buttons very carefully, checking the number as I went. I had no more money to put in if I made a mistake the first time.

It only rang twice before it was answered. 'Hello,' said a boy's voice. He was speaking Somali, but his accent was very strange. 'Are you in the phone box?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I don't know where—'

'Just wait,' he said. 'I'm coming.' And he rang off.

I stood with the phone in my hand, looking up and down the road and wondering how I would recognize the boy. But I needn't have worried, because it was easy. I knew him as soon as he came round the corner. A tall Somali boy, heading straight for the phone box.

He opened the door and stared at me. 'I'm Abdi,'

he said. When I hesitated, he said it again, in full this time. 'I'm Abdirahman Ahmed Mussa.'

He was much older than Mahmoud, and tall too, but he was—more of a boy. That was when I really understood how far I'd travelled. I was far away from Somalia, and far from myself, in a place where the people were going to be different. And I had to learn how to live there

I lifted my head and stared straight back at Abdi. 'And I'm Khadija Ahmed Mussa,' I said.

Freya

I didn't know Abdi or Khadija then. And Somalia was just one name in a list I'd been reciting for most of my life: *My dad's been a war photographer in Darfur and Afghanistan and Rwanda and Somalia . . .*

There were pictures to go with the words, of course, because that's what a photographer does, but they weren't the kind of images you'd show to a little child. By the time I was old enough to see them, Dad's trips were in the past, and I never really sorted out which was which. The photos were all pictures of violence and grief and dust, and the places blurred together in my mind.

It must have been five or six months after Khadija arrived in Britain when I found out *exactly* where Somalia is. It suddenly jumped off the map and into my life. I remember the moment very clearly, because Sandy and I were having breakfast together.

Maybe that doesn't sound special to you. Maybe you have breakfast with your mother every morning

of the year. But then your mother's probably not a global brand. I don't suppose she works fourteen hours a day and then staggers back from the workshop with a heap of sketches and a headache.

On normal days, I don't see Sandy until the evening. And sometimes not even then. But that morning was special because she'd just come back from Paris—the Fashion Week and the big fabric fair—and she was sitting opposite me with a tall stack of books in front of her.

Paris always sets her head buzzing. By the time she reaches home, she's already full of ideas for her next collection and they usually spread out on to the breakfast table. But normally she's playing around with photos and fabric swatches. Not books. So I wasn't sure what she was up to.

The night before, she'd come to Dad's flat to pick me up, on her way home from the airport. Dad had a meal ready for her, of course, but she hardly ate a mouthful because she was too busy raiding his bookshelves. Without any explanation. Those were the books piled up on the table between us. Heavy, dull paperbacks and second-hand hardbacks with tatty bindings. As I chewed my bagel, I leaned sideways and read some of the titles:

A Modern History of Somalia.

Me Against my Brother: at war in Somalia, Sudan, and

Rwanda (Hm, I wonder if Dad knows the man who wrote that?)

Whatever Happened to Somalia?

None of those sounded like the kind of thing Sandy might read. What on earth was she up to? I craned my neck a bit further, trying to see the book she was holding, but before I could make out the words on the spine, she suddenly looked up. Her face was pink and excited.

'Did you know there's myrrh in Somalia!' she said.

I blinked. 'Yeah? And gold too? And frankincense?'

'Don't be so *religious*.' She pulled a face. Then she looked down at the book and raised her eyebrows. 'Hey! Not sure about gold, but there *is* frankincense. And look at the fabrics! I knew I'd seen those patterns somewhere before.' She leaned in close, peering at a photograph, and then she passed the book across, to show me.

It was a picture of ruin and devastation.

What are you *like*, Sandy Dexter? OK, so, the woman at the front of the picture had a huge, patterned head-scarf and a little heap of myrrh. But was Sandy really expecting me to focus on that? What about the buildings behind, shot full of holes? What about the boy in the background, holding a gun?

'Who cares about the bloody fabrics?' I said.

Sandy shook her head impatiently. '*Look!* That scarf

is the only colour in the whole place. And why do you think she chose such a bright one? Because that's what people need when life is bad. Colour and pattern—' She waved her hands in the air, launching into a typical Sandy tirade about how important clothes are.

I *hate* fashion. I hate the way it chews life up and spits it out in T-shirts and tailoring and ten varieties of handbag. If you ask me, the whole business is pointless. But not according to Sandy. When she talks about clothes, her face is fierce and intense. She says, *Fashion's a way of understanding the world. It's part of being human—and it's right there, at the cutting edge of culture.*

Well, if fashion's a knife, she's right there at the edge of the blade, slicing into everything that's pompous and settled and smug. That's what makes her iconic, of course. Even my friend Ruby went goggle-eyed when she worked out the connection.

'You mean your mother's—*Sandy Dexter*?'

Yup, that's right. I may not be Style Queen of my school, but I'm the daughter of Sandy Shocking Dexter. Fashion celebrity *par excellence.* The designer who turns headlines into hemlines, and sums up the *zeitgeist* in a zip-all-over dress. And she's not just trying to be clever. That's how things come out when she's really thought about them.

And what she was thinking about this time was that photograph.

She stared at it until her coffee was cold. Then she stood up and muttered something about needing a sketch pad. 'We can go out later on. OK, Freya? I just want to make a couple of notes first . . . '

I knew what that meant. I'd be lucky if I saw her again before supper. Last night, we'd made a plan to spend the whole day together, doing stupid things, like going ice skating, and eating chicken and strawberries in the park. But I knew none of that was going to happen now.

When I'd finished my coffee, I went out to do some basic shopping. It was no use relying on Sandy to remember anything. At least I could make sure there was food in the flat.

I was out much longer than I'd planned. While I was on the way to the supermarket, Ruby called and we met up for lunch. Then we wandered round our favourite shops and I bought a DVD of *Top Hat*. I love old films—and there's nothing like a Fred'n' Ginger movie when you're feeling down.

When I came back, the whole place was empty and there was a message on the answerphone.

'Hi, Freya. Sandy asked me to call you.' No mistaking that hesitant Estonian voice. It was Stefan, her star apprentice. He coughed apologetically.

'She's . . . er . . . had to go away for a couple of days. I hope you're all right to stay with your dad. Any problems—give me a ring back.'

Your mum's never taken off like that? Well, it's been happening to me all my life. When a new idea hits, Sandy can't bear to stop thinking about it. Either she shuts herself in the workshop all night, or she goes travelling.

When I was little, there was always an au pair living in to take care of me. Usually a new one, who didn't quite know what was what. It worked OK, but life's been much simpler since Dad stopped working for TV companies and started teaching instead. He still does some photography—mostly portraits now—but he's always around. And his flat's just round the corner.

I made myself a coffee and then rang his mobile.

'Sandy's gone off again,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'Hang on a minute.' I heard him muttering briefly to someone else and then he came back to the phone, 'Do you need help carrying stuff?'

I looked at the bags of food I'd just bought. It would only go to waste if I left it in Sandy's flat. 'Yes, I could do with a hand. But there's no rush.'

'How about if I pick you up in an hour?'

'That's fine,' I said. 'It won't take me long to pack.'

How could it? I hadn't even emptied my backpack

properly. All I had to do was put back the things I'd taken out last night and I was ready to go, in less than fifteen minutes. To fill in the time until Dad came, I sat down at the kitchen table and started leafing through the books Sandy had left there. I was just getting into one of them when the doorbell rang.

Exactly an hour after I'd put the phone down.

There are lots of things I love about my father and one of them is that he is utterly, one hundred per cent reliable. When I opened the door, he was standing in the corridor, grinning.

'I should have watched what Sandy was scavenging off my bookshelves,' he said, as he gathered up my carrier bags. 'What is it this time?'

It's always a huge secret what Sandy's doing, until the models actually come parading down the catwalk. If I pick up any hints, I can't even tell my friends, in case it gets out. But I am allowed to talk to Dad. Even though they've split up—sort of—Sandy still trusts him more than anyone else in the world.

'It's Somalia,' I said.

'*Somalia?*' Dad's eyebrows went through the ceiling. 'What's she going to do with that? She can hardly—'

'Oh yes she can,' I said bitterly. I picked up the backpack and slung it over my shoulder. 'She's totally callous. This morning she was reading a book about war and saying, *Look at the fabrics*, as if nothing else

mattered. She doesn't care about anything except fashion.'

'Yes, she does,' Dad said. 'She cares as much as anyone. But it all goes into silhouettes and texture and colour. That's what she's like, Frey. Can you *imagine* her writing to MPs or leading protest marches?'

'Might be more useful.' I stepped out of the flat and slammed the door, hard. 'Maybe I'll suggest it when she comes back.'

Dad stopped grinning. 'She hasn't *gone* to Somalia, has she?' He was trying to sound casual, but it wasn't a great success. I looked at his face and my heart lurched.

'I don't think so. Why? Is it dangerous?'

'Just a bit.' He turned round and headed for the lift.

That was all he said. He's not the sort of man who goes on and on about things (another reason I love him) but he was very silent as we headed out of the building.

I tried to distract him. 'Hey—I've just been reading one of the books she borrowed. Guess what the Chinese imported from Somalia in the tenth century.'

'Incense?' Dad said vaguely. I could tell he wasn't really listening.

I shook my head. 'Guess again.'

He made an elaborate thinking face and then shrugged. 'No idea. I give up. What *did* the Chinese import from Somalia in the tenth century?'

'Giraffes!' I said with a flourish.

No reaction at all. I waited while we walked down the road and round the corner, but he didn't even look at me.

'Oh, come *on*!' I said, when I couldn't bear it any longer. 'Think about it. Why on earth did they want *giraffes*?'

Normally that's the kind of silly challenge he likes. *Fifteen things to do with a giraffe.* But not today. He gave me a rather pallid smile and I could tell he was trying to think of something funny, but all he managed was one feeble suggestion.

'Maybe they used them for . . . pruning trees?'

No, I didn't laugh either. But I don't think he noticed. He just kept on worrying as we walked into his building and went up in the lift. He didn't say another word until we were inside his flat.

It's very bare in there. Not like Sandy's flat, which is full of pictures and reference books, with scraps of fabric cluttering the worktops and spilling out over the tables. What Dad likes is space and light and air. His only decoration is the huge window wall, with its fantastic view across the city.

It was almost dark when we walked in. Dad made

me hot chocolate with marshmallows and I drank it standing by the window, looking out at the deep blue sky. Staring at the pretty coloured lights that drown out most of the real stars.

When I'd finished my drink I turned back into the room and Dad was standing there with his camera bag in one hand. He was looking thoughtfully at me and the window.

I hate having my picture taken. Photographs are for leggy models and glossy celebrities. Since Dad started doing portrait work, he's produced hundreds of amazing images like that. But I hate it when he points a camera at me.

'Come on, Frey,' he said, wheedling. 'Trust me. It's a fantastic shot.'

I wanted to say no. But at least it had taken his mind off Sandy, so I nodded—grumpily—and turned back towards the window. 'Like this?'

He shook his head. 'Don't force it. Just forget about me and look at the moon.'

I hadn't even noticed the moon, but there it was, way above the tallest buildings. A tiny, pale crescent, like a sliver of cloud just about to dissolve. I stared up at it and for some reason I suddenly thought about Somalia again. The people there were three hours ahead of us, which made it the middle of the night. Was there a Somali girl looking up at the moon as

well? If there was, she could probably see a thousand times more stars than I could.

But it was the same moon.

When I turned round, Dad beckoned me across to look. 'It's a good one,' he said. 'I'll make you a print if you like.'

He hadn't photographed me directly at all. It was a shot of the window, with my face reflected in the glass. I was floating in the night sky, looking ghostly and transparent, like the moon. It was a beautiful picture all right.

But the face was still mine. Square and pale, with a little curly fringe.

'I look like a cow,' I said. 'A Charolais.'

Dad pulled a face at me. 'Most people would rather have a cow than a giraffe.'

'Not in Somalia. It's camels or nothing for them.'

Finally I'd made him laugh. 'Then you'll never be a star over there.' He patted my cheek. 'Go to bed, Freya. You're beautiful.'

Mahmoud had a picture too.

It was a picture of his sister Geri, going off in their father's car. She was turning round to wave to the rest of them and there was a wide smile on her face. He could see it clearly, through all the dust that swirled up round the car.

It wasn't a real picture, because it only existed inside his head, but it was always the same. Whenever he thought about Geri, he saw her smiling and waving, all through everything that happened in the months after she went away.

She smiled as the drought shrivelled up the pasture. She smiled as the goats and the sheep were sold to buy food for the camels.

And she was still smiling when the camels began to die.

It was the drought that killed them off. One by one the wells dried up, all across the land they travelled. And sometimes, when there was water, other people were there to claim it, desperate to save their own animals.

All day, Mahmoud's uncles watched the sky, hunting for some sign of rain. But nothing ever interrupted the scorching blue over their heads. So every night they all sat round the fire, discussing where to go next. But there was never an easy answer.

They travelled for a week without water to reach the last place they could try. Mahmoud was walking right at the back, with the goats, and long before he reached the well he

knew it was no use. The ground was hard and dusty and his uncles were standing round the hole together, shaking their heads. Mahmoud saw his mother straighten her shoulders, getting ready to carry the heavy bundles again.

No water.

What were they going to do?

They talked about it again that night, going round and round the same hopeless ideas they'd been discussing for months. But the words were as empty as the waterhole, because everyone knew, already, what the choices were. Otherwise they would starve and dry up, like old thorn bushes.

Unless they found water, very soon, they would have to give up and travel away from the places they knew. They would have to go to the camp and ask for food.