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Opening extract from

Lost Dogs

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He thought he was the last boy alive. He had not seen another person in four days, or was it six? Trapped in total darkness, he could not even see himself. He had to touch his eyelids to find out if his eyes were open. The food had run out. The boy survived by drinking rainwater running down the steel walls. His universe was pitch-dark and sealed tight. Sometimes, to remind himself he was alive, he shouted his own name.

‘AKEEM!’

It echoed back off the walls.

There was only one dim star in Akeem’s universe. A button was recessed in the wall above him. Its weak orange glow was his only comfort, but he knew never to push the button. That would be suicide, for it opened the freighter’s forward door. The forward door was taller than Akeem, even though it was partly buried. It was cold to the touch. He ran his fingers along its watertight seals. Beyond the door was ocean, cold and vast.

Akeem prayed for London to be the freighter’s destination. He was in its hold, a deep storage tank half full of coarse salt. High above his head, hatches were clamped down. The forward door was in the bow, ploughing through the sea. From the stern, through the bulkhead, came the muffled blare of the engine. It was loud but so steady that by the time he had spent a second day in the hold Akeem had stopped noticing it. The endless drone was just a new kind of silence. Akeem stayed by the forward door, dug into the salt. It had settled since leaving port, its level dropping by a metre. This salt was not the fine kind you put on food, it was unprocessed and gritty. But by the third day, barely aware of himself, Akeem was taking pinches of the salt and eating it. Hunger was as constant as the engine noise. It was a throb that underlay everything.

Akeem wanted to pray facing Mecca but had no idea of its direction. So the light of the button came to represent Mecca. He knelt before it. A Muslim is taught to pray five times a day but Akeem, under his breath, prayed much more than that. By the fourth day he was in a permanent state of prayer. Prayer was as constant as the engine noise, as constant as the hunger. Some boys, trapped and alone, would have felt forgotten by God. The closing of the hatches would have cut the cord to Him. But Akeem did not feel that way.

‘Allah,’ he repeated countless times, ‘I am in the belly of this ship. Keep watch over me.’

Akeem was confident God was watching and would help him in his time of need. This was good. That time was coming.

Akeem woke with a start. It was the sixth day. He lay still a full minute before working out what had woken him. The note of the engine had dropped an octave. The freighter was gearing down. It had arrived.

‘God is Great,’ Akeem said.

He almost put in a request for London but decided it was too small an issue to bother God with now. There was a more immediate problem. It was every stowaway's problem immediately after arrival: getting off the freighter without being caught. Akeem was not free yet.

The hull gonged as it struck the quayside. The reverberation rang on and on, buzzing in Akeem's ears. Soon a crack appeared above his head. The hatches, hydraulics whining, drew back and hinged upwards, rising as two big triangles. Akeem expected blinding daylight, but instead stars twinkled in the gap. The cargo of salt picked up some light and gleamed softly. Akeem rubbed his eyes, looked, and rubbed them again.

'God is Great,' he said. His chance of escape was better under darkness. The rusty air began lifting. Akeem gulped fresh, warm oxygen. It tasted of a new life.

With a clank, the hatches locked into vertical position. Now Akeem could see there were ladders leading up out of the hold. Akeem moved towards the nearest. He knew that once he was halfway up he would be out of the shadows and exposed. He would have to be fast.

From the outside world came a loud iron grunt. Something was approaching from the sky. The arm of a crane swung into the frame of Akeem's view. A wrought-iron grabber, hung on steel cable loops, dangled from its end like a massive pendulum. The grabber was called a clamshell bucket, Akeem had seen the same kind of equipment at work before. Now the bucket was shut, like two hands cupped together. To Akeem, it seemed alive, so long had it been since he had seen a real living thing. A strange thought occurred to him, *did the human race die off while I was stowaway?* It was such an automated world that maybe crewless cargo ships sailed on to their destinations regardless. Hatches opened and cranes performed their duties automatically. After human extinction the machines rolled on.

But no. Crewmen were setting down the gangway. Akeem heard their shouts and recognised the thump and rattle as the gangway hit the quayside. He knew he would receive no kindness from the crew. On deck he would have to dash past them. They would have strong arms, well able to crush his ambitions.

Akeem inched towards the ladder.

On deck he would have to be wily, behave unexpectedly. He would not run for the gangway, he decided, but to the seaward side of the freighter, and dive.

Akeem was an excellent swimmer and not afraid of high dives. He had lived most of his life on the docks of Lagos. He and his friends had a money-earning performance for the passengers of big ferries. They canoed alongside as they docked. Passengers dropped coins close, but not too close, to the canoes. The boys were not meant to catch the coins in their hands, that would be too easy. They had to dive for them. This was the show. The coin would flicker as it descended, leaving a silvery trail of bubbles. Akeem would dive, his legs whipping tight together and driving him deep. Passengers watched the soles of his feet disappear into the blue. When Akeem re-emerged, the coin would shine in his raised hand.

That was when Akeem began thinking of the big boats as full of promise, possibility and coins. Where did they come from? Where did they go? Rich places. Places where he could live decently. Lisbon, Liverpool, London ...

Above, the clamshell bucket had opened. There was the whirling sound of loosened winches. The bucket was not lowered. It was dropped. The whole freighter felt the blow and dipped in the water. The

iron hands clamped shut, claiming a hillock of salt. Cables burned red-hot as the bucket retracted up, then swept out of view, an iron cloud raining loose salt. It pulled more stale air out of the hold after it. The fresh air of Akeem's future poured in.

I am so close, he thought.

But the ladder was so tall. The deck so wide.

The bucket swung back into view. Akeem had a new idea. It was dangerous, but as soon as he thought it he knew he would try it. Thinking it and trying it were the same thing.

As the bucket fell he dashed out to meet it. Air whistled down. The bucket blocked out the stars.

Too far. Back. BACK.

Akeem chucked himself backwards. The bucket hit the salt as if trying to knock a hole in the hull. Akeem smelled iron. He looked up at the bucket, twice his height, as it closed. It sealed itself into a resolute mouth. It was a straight mouth, not smiling, not frowning. It did not care either way.

Akeem jumped at it. His fingers dug into grooves in the ironwork. Winches whined and the bucket withdrew. Seconds, and it would be above deck level. If Akeem stayed clinging outside the bucket he would be seen. Besides, each fingertip was a focused point of pain. His hold was weakening. He had to get up. He had to get over. He had to get *inside* the bucket. But there was nothing to give leverage. Akeem was still dangling from the impenetrable bucket as it emerged from the hold. He glimpsed the new city. He saw tall buildings and mountains beyond. He saw the blinking lights of an aeroplane coming into land. He saw a motorway bearing a river of headlights. Then he let go.

Akeem hit the salt. On his back he watched the bucket rove away. Lying in the middle of the hold, Akeem was completely exposed. Black skin on a white landscape. But Akeem had a new idea. He did not move. He prayed.

'Allah,' he whispered. 'Let me keep my life. Let me keep my body. I will use them to honour you always.'

He was bargaining with God.

The bucket returned and Akeem was in the middle of its next drop, at least he hoped it was the middle. He curled himself up.

'Allah,' he said as air pressure squeezed his eardrums, 'let me keep my life—'

He bounced and the bucket was everywhere at once. He was spun in banks of salt. It compressed, crushing the air out of him and pinning his arms to his sides. The bucket was almost closed. Was his whole body inside? Akeem imagined the indifference of the bucket as it separated him from his feet.

'Let me keep my body—'

CLANG.

Akeem was still fully attached to himself and encased in iron and salt. Lubricator smoked as the bucket raced upwards and away. When the crane's arm locked, the bucket swung back and forth a few times. Akeem was away from the freighter but now had a new worry.

'I will use it—'

A slit opened in front of Akeem's face. Again he saw city lights. The salt's clench fell away. He could move his feet again. Then his legs. Akeem took one longing look at the new city. He could see a lot from up there. He was obviously high up.

‘... to honour you—’

He tried to think of it as a feet-first dive. Body straight, arms tight to sides.

‘... always.’

He dropped.

Open.

Air.

Akeem struck the mouth of a new machine. He was flung along a curved trajectory and was in the salt again. He took a breath, his first in ten seconds. He was inside a funnel. Around him salt turned in a sluggish whirlpool, disappearing down into itself and taking Akeem with it. From below he felt the tug of the inevitable. It was like being inside an egg timer.

Akeem bashed his chin as he was sucked through the centre. He fell through space before being embedded, up to his waist, in the peak of a salt cone. He was inside a warehouse now. No one around. Drips of blood fell from his chin. Akeem watched the red dots shine and expand on the white salt. After so much time in the dark the bright colour mesmerised him.

Right then Akeem was dazed. He should not have been watching colours. He should have gotten away from under the load about to be dumped on his head.

A column of salt hammered him down. He stayed still a few seconds. Blackness. No light. No air. *Am I dead?* The weight on his back increased. No, not dead, but buried. Now Akeem dug and kicked, trying to get out of the salt mountain. He imagined being buried alive, living but paralysed in its centre. He would die of suffocation if he was lucky. Or thirst if he was not.

The salt became denser around him. He fought for twenty seconds but was not out.

Which way am I going?

Forget Mecca, Akeem did not even know which way was *up*. He shoved some space out from around his face. A single hot terrified tear squeezed from his eye. It did not roll down his cheek. It rolled to the bridge of his nose and fell away from his face. Akeem realised he had been digging the wrong way, he was pointed down into the middle of the cone.

He dug sideways. Another bucket load was dropped. Akeem felt his ribs cracking. Suffocation, Akeem discovered, was the sensation of your lungs shrinking until they were like two dry tea bags. Soon he would be immobilised. Then doomed.

The bucket would work another hour. The freighter settled against the quayside. Once it had offloaded it would await its return cargo then go home. The salt cone filled one end of the warehouse, its base a perfect circle. The cone was pretty in a way, shimmering as it grew new layers. It was self-contained and peaceful, like a tomb. Then four fingers poked out.

It was like touching life itself. Akeem hauled himself out and rolled down the side. He crawled to a hiding place. He spat out salt, shook it from his ears and dug it from his hair. He thanked God again and again and again.

The funnel he had fallen through was a towering piece of equipment, going up through the warehouse roof. On its side were tall white letters: ‘PORT OF HARDGLASS’.

‘Hard ... glass,’ said Akeem.

It was not London but Akeem did not care. Maybe God had a plan for him in this city. He smiled. He had survived the journey and made it ashore. His arrival was blessed. It was fate. God was Great.