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Opening extract from

The Fastest Boy in the World

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Chapter One

In my dreams I'm always running, running, running. Sometimes my feet fly over the ground and I'm sure that if I could just go a little bit faster I'd take off and fly like an eagle. Sometimes my legs feel as heavy as tree trunks, but I know that I must go on and reach the finishing line whatever it costs.

I've been running almost since I was a toddler. As soon as I could toddle, I'd stagger after my father as fast as my little legs would take me when he set out for the market on our donkey.

'Solomon! Come back!' my mother would shout. I wouldn't listen, so she'd have to run after me, snatch me up and laugh with me all the way home.

That was how my childhood began. And I can remember, as clearly as anything, the night when everything changed.

I was eleven years old. At least, I think I was eleven. In the countryside in Ethiopia, nobody takes much notice of how old you are.

It was the end of the day, and the door of our house was firmly shut. It always made me shiver to think of the night outside. Not just because it was dark and cold, but because there might be a hyena or two, lurking in the darkness, or, even worse, something – demonish.

I'll have to explain what our family home was like, in case you have never been to Ethiopia. It was round, like most other people's houses up there in our cool highlands, and it had a thatched roof that went up to a point. There was only one room, with the fire burning away in the middle. It got a bit smoky, but it kept us warm and gave a glowing light. There was a screen at one end, and our animals lived behind it – at night, that is. In the daytime, of course, they were out grazing.

Anyway, that evening Ma was stirring the pot of stew that was cooking over the fire. The smell was so good it was making me feel very hungry.

'How old am I, Ma?' I said suddenly. I don't know what put the idea into my head.

'Let me see,' she said vaguely, dropping another pinch of red-hot pepper into the pot. I could tell she wasn't listening.

Abba (that's what we called my father) *was*

listening, though. He had just come in from his work out on our farm. He sat down on a little stool beside the fire, and I could see he was as hungry as I was.

'You were born the year the harvest was so bad, and we had to borrow all that money from your uncle,' he said.

Ma looked reproachfully at him.

Abba blinked, and looked a bit guilty.

'I wasn't thinking,' he said quietly. 'It was Hailu who was born that year.'

Hailu was my older brother, but he died when he was little. Ma always sighs when anyone reminds her of him.

Abba shot her an understanding look, then he scratched his head.

'Oh no, I remember now,' he said. 'You were born the year the magician came and turned my stick into a wand of gold.'

I loved it when Abba was in his teasing mood. Konjit, my little sister, had been picking up the unburnt ends of twigs and throwing them on to the fire, while twisting a bit of hair over her forehead at the same time. She only ever seems to use one hand for anything useful. The other one is permanently

fiddling with her hair. Now, though, she stopped for a whole long minute.

'Oh!' she said, her big brown eyes as round as the buttons on Grandfather's cotton jacket. 'A gold wand? Where is it?'

I nudged her, just to show that I knew she was being silly, then had to pull her upright in case she toppled over into the fire.

'It turned back into a stick again, just like that,' Abba said, giving me a sly look. 'Anyway, it wasn't that year. You were born just at the time when Twisty Horn had twins, only they didn't turn out to be calves but a couple of chickens. You should have seen them! They went flapping about all over the place.'

Everyone laughed, and even Grandfather, who had been sitting on the clay bench that ran right round the wall of the house, made a sort of rusty, wheezing sound that meant that he was laughing too, but Konjit didn't even smile. She looked quite shocked.

'Cows can't have chickens for babies, Abba,' she said seriously. 'Everyone knows that.'

She falls for it every time.

Just at that moment, a whiffling snort came from the stable behind the screen of sticks. I knew it was

Twisty Horn, and not Long Tail or Big Hoof. I know the sound of all our animals. I can tell our donkey (her name is Lucky) from all the other donkeys at the market just by the way she brays. I know our three dogs too, of course, but they don't come into the house with us. Their job is to stay outside and guard our farm. They pretty much look after themselves.

'You're quite right, darling. Cows only have calves,' said Abba, pulling Konjit sideways so that she could lean against his arm. I could tell his teasing mood was over. He was too tired for much when the evening came. He'd been out working all day on the farm.

'Supper's ready,' Ma said at last. She fetched out the big enamel tray and laid a huge round piece of pancake bread on it. (Our bread is called 'injera', and it's soft and thin and delicious.) Then she scooped spoonfuls of stew from the pot and set them out in front of each of our places.

Grandfather stood up and walked over to join us by the fire. I waited expectantly.

Five, I said to myself.

I counted the steps he was taking, and, sure enough, his knees cracked like breaking sticks at the fifth step.