

Reading

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SUNLIGHT GRAZED HER skin, graceful like a single ray of light piercing the windowpane, tiredness clinging to her mind, exhaustion and an intense desire for sleep and forgetfulness which never came.

What did her teacher say? 'Fair means light. The colour of my hair is the opposite of your hair which is dark.' Asmina shrank from the words, conscious of her difference, even though for some time now she had begun constructing meaning from the sounds.

Once, Susanna, her teacher, had asked her what she would like to do when she had learnt to read, but she had found it hard to imagine continuing on with her education. In the early hours of the morning, she had practised her reading, hoping that the hypnotic movement of her eyes across the page might actually help her to sleep.

She picked up the magazine Susanna had lent her and began flipping through the pages, grappling with the unfamiliar sound and rhythm of the words, conscious of her thoughts, her eyes moving slowly, back and forth across the page, remembering the war, the refugee camps and the brutal hands of soldiers.

Putting her books into her bag, Asmina collected her belongings and left the flat, her arms engulfed in bangles, like bands of protection, large hooped earrings swaying as she crossed the road. Malith, her ex-husband would be waiting for her when she arrived for her access visit with their daughter, Nyanath, in the afternoon.

Tottering down the street towards the bus stop, her chest heaved, breathing in the smoke and fumes of the traffic. A car door slammed and her heart thudded loudly in her chest as she passed by African and middle-eastern restaurants that reminded her of home. A man dressed in camouflage trousers stood near the bus stop muttering to himself. Asmina glanced away, trying to distract herself by thinking of the time she had spent with Nyanath at the beach the previous weekend.

The man lurched towards her and she moved away from him, standing closer to the doorway of a shop. He shuffled further down the street as the bus arrived and Asmina climbed on board sitting down behind a young couple her own age.

Closing her eyes, she tried to visualise when she and Malith were first together but an image of soldiers flashed through her mind and she opened her eyes, focusing on the shops and traffic outside. Crowds of people surged past, as the bus arrived at the interchange and Asmina climbed out hurriedly onto the street. A man hurled abuse, the fury in his voice reminding her of the force of fists against her cheekbone. She could see the library up ahead and the anxious patter of her heart died down when she noticed Susanna standing by the doorway.

Susanna smiled kindly, her corn-yellow hair and sunburnt skin a familiar sight. 'Are you okay, Asmina?' she asked. 'I was worried because you didn't turn up to the last lesson.'

Asmina mumbled an apology and they walked inside the library together where the study room was occupied by three young men. Standing by the doorway, Asmina watched the men poring over books. The strange mathematical symbols were even more baffling to her than the letters and words on her worksheets. The young men glanced up at her curiously, the directness of their gaze distressing her, and an image of soldiers tearing at her clothing flashed through her mind.

Susanna moved forward, pushing the door open.

'Hurry up, boys,' she said, her tone commanding and tense. 'It's time to finish up.'

They glanced up at Susanna disrespectfully but then they turned to stare at the child-like woman by her side. Deflecting their glances, Asmina turned away, remembering the weight of the soldiers' bodies and the force of their fists against her face. The young men began staring intently at her, their eyes mesmerised, and trance-like as Susanna clicked her tongue angrily, half-amused, half-annoyed. She glanced at Asmina who lowered her eyes in shame.

Asmina tried to will them away, retreating into an illusion of calm, detaching her mind as she had learnt to do whenever the trauma became too intense. She became conscious of their fascination with

her beauty and otherness, their eyes never leaving her dark face, gold jewellery and the woven braids in her hair.

'Come on boys, it's time to get out now,' said Susanna angrily.

At last they got up from the table, barely moving, their limbs heavy, eyes remaining brazenly on Asmina's face and body.

'Thank God they've finally gone,' Susanna said wearily.

They sat down at the table and Asmina took out her worksheets. She began studying pictures of the ocean and the beach, her mind focusing on the traces of ink on the page. Her lips and tongue began breaking the images into fragments. Tasting the salt of the sea in her mind, she tried to make sense of the blocks of words, filling in the gaps between the sounds, still bothered by the young mens' behaviour.

'Sound them out,' said Susanna.

Asmina pushed her lips together, feeling the sensation of her tongue against her teeth. Her lips pulled back with the 'sh' sound of ship, imagining a boat gliding across the waves. She continued connecting pictures and words, symbols and sounds, the images and patterns merging as the words began to make sense. Struggling, she voiced the sounds carefully, the words flowing together, sometimes smoothly, sometimes haltingly, her eyes drooping from lack of sleep, images of night and trauma flashing through her mind.

She couldn't possibly tell Susanna specific details about the assaults and she remembered that her previous teacher was also teaching a young girl whose father had forbidden her to read. They had been meeting in secret so that her father wouldn't know.

'These are all words connected with eating,' said Susanna, showing her pictures of eating implements, a prong-shaped instrument and then, what she feared most, a knife. Asmina mouthed the sounds, connecting them to the squiggles on the page, the endless repetition, and strange pronunciations, so that she confused the word 'knife' with 'life'. Then, Susanna showed her a picture of a woman, lines drawn from the different parts of the body, joined to words on the outer edge of the page.

Asmina's mind began to wander to the images of soldiers again, her daughter cowering in the distance. She tried to imagine herself

reading, flipping through those magazines, looking at the women with their garish clothes, listening to the frightening sounds of the outside world. She would be walking again for hours tonight, even though she had been warned not to walk alone. It would be the usual journey along the road, sheltering from the watchful eyes of strangers.

Susanna's kindness reassured her. She had learned to speak this new language, surrounded by the warmth of her voice, a haven away from the agitation of war, words pressing in on her, against her temples, crowding in against her consciousness.

She returned to the page and began following the words and pictures again. They were beginning to make sense and she glanced over at a group of students outside the room.

'That will be you in a few years' time,' said Susanna emphatically. Asmina shook her head sadly. 'No, I don't think so,' she said.

But then Susanna insisted. 'No, I can assure you, you're very clever, one day that will be you.'

She collected her books, unable to meet Susanna's eye, her stomach churning as they arranged to meet in a week's time. Asmina left the library, walking briskly towards the train. Approaching the station, she began thinking of her parents, angry that they had wanted so little for her when she had shown so much promise. Descending the escalators at the station, she walked along the platform, sitting down slowly on a bench. Staring out towards the train tracks, she stood up and walked to the edge of the platform, studying the empty tracks, a disturbing compulsion pushing her forward, willing her to walk closer.

Moving away a little, she assessed the distance down the line and the likely speed the train might be travelling. A whooshing noise willed her to move even closer, but as her foot touched the white boundary of concrete at the edge, she felt a sharp pain in her shoulder, a hand pressing in and pulling her back.

Terrified, she glanced up into the face of an elderly man who was peering at her anxiously, his face creased into an expression of confusion and concern.

'You were close to the edge of the platform, Miss,' the man said sombrely, but with a hint of wariness or embarrassment. 'I thought you were going to faint.'

She turned away from him, tears pricking her eyes as the train sped into the platform. Climbing on board, she hurried through to another carriage.

Sinking down onto the seat, Asmina's head began to nod again from lack of sleep, lulled by the gentle rhythm of the train, wide open spaces calming her mind, her eyes drooping until an image of blood and gunfire jolted her awake. Studying the trees and the distant horizon through the window, she realised that the vigilance that had saved her from future assaults was now destroying her life. Turning away from the window, she began watching the young mothers on the train with their children, their lives full of innocence and hope.

Sighing, she pulled out her workbook from her bag, and began turning the pages, studying the squiggly lines of the words, images of the sea and shells. She began repeating the words and sentences about the meal she had made with Nyanath on an access visit, the lines of the words clearer now, more defined.

Tracing the words with her finger, she began thinking of Nyanath, her fear and timidity, how she was already withdrawing away from her, distancing herself from her mother's disturbance.

The train pulled into the station with a squeal of breaks and Asmina put her book back into her bag and stepped out onto the platform. Climbing the steps towards the road, her body and face relaxed with the gentle warmth of the sun as she remembered her visit to the beach with Nyanath.

The streets were less intimidating than the area that she walked through at night near the flat and her mood began to lighten. Approaching Malith's building, she bowed her head wearily, opening the door, and climbing the stairs to his apartment. The door was up ahead, a barrier to the world that Malith had created with Nyanath. But after she rang the doorbell, Nyanath appeared at the doorway, wrapping her arms around Asmina's waist, her school uniform engulfing her tiny body.

'I'm leaving now for my class,' said Malith from the entrance to his bedroom. 'I'll see you tonight. Try to focus on what you're doing, Asmina. I know you're tired but it's important for Nyanath's safety.'

He glanced away from her towards Nyanath, the shadow of a smile brushing his lips, a distant reminder of the love that they had once felt for one another as a family.

Asmina bowed her head angrily, conscious that Nyanath had heard what he'd said. But she walked over and sat down next to Nyanath on the couch, waiting for Malith to leave the apartment. Trying to catch Nyanath's attention, she watched as she fumbled with some school books.

At last Malith left the apartment, the door slamming behind him. Asmina began flipping through one of Nyanath's school books on the couch, recognizing some of the words that she had just learnt herself in the lesson, 'shell' and 'ship'.

'What have you been doing at school?' she asked Nyanath, her confidence growing.

'Nothing much,' Nyanath said, averting her gaze.

Her confidence began to dwindle as Nyanath picked up a pen and began writing numbers like the boys in the study room, her pen gliding smoothly over the page.

'Did you like our day at the beach last weekend?' Asmina asked her at last, unable to bear the painful silence between them.

Nyanath continued writing in the workbook, no longer interested in talking, her tiny tongue protruding slightly between her lips with the exertion of concentration.

'Yes,' she said at last, still avoiding her gaze. But Asmina could tell by the softening of her face that her memory of the beach was a happy one.

'At the beach I found a shell with my mother,' Asmina read aloud, picking up Nyanath's other exercise book, the one with the words 'shell' and 'ship'.

Nyanath glanced up with a confused expression, shocked that her mother had deciphered the words.

'It's about our time at the beach.' Asmina said confidently. 'I just learnt some of the words in my lesson and I can figure out the other ones.'

She began reading the story, haltingly at first, conscious of the tiny smile on her daughter's lips. Nyanath's smile broadened and she reached out and touched her mother's hand gently, listening to the sound of her mother reading as they placed their fingers on the letters together, following the words and the way they flowed from left to right across the page.