

**THE
THREAD
THAT
CONNECTS
US**

*To the oppressed, wherever you may be in this world,
God willing, you will one day be free*

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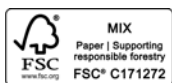
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USBORNE

SUMMER

OLD HURTS, NEW HURTS

In the district of Yaaqshid, Mogadishu, in a villa built in the centre of town, a girl and boy fell in a love that existed only where other eyes could not see them. In the shadows of a balmy twilight, behind the cover of trees, or in glances stolen across the frequent gatherings in that house.

It had an intense, almost wild energy, this love of theirs. Nothing could quieten the raging sense of yearning and longing that clung to the edges of their hearts, that clamoured along their vessels – not even the hours they spent away from each other’s company, or the condemnation expressed at the idea of their matrimony.

“A housemaid from a lowly tribe to marry our great son?” The elders tutted and shook their heads. “No, no. There is no logic in such a match.”

So the girl and boy had no choice but to pretend they felt nothing for each other, to keep their infatuation secret. But, eventually, even the secret began to bulge along its seams and joints, unable to constrain their love any longer and so, one night, they bound themselves to each other under the eyes of God.

From their fleeting union came many things, but it ended as chaotically as it began, as these intense entanglements often do.

It wouldn't have surprised the elders, had they known about this love affair made true, but it surprised the girl and boy, and for a long time after, their hearts stopped feeling anything but the contraction of life's beats.

Their tumultuous love didn't leave a mark on this world. At least, not one anyone else could see then.

SAFIYA

I flip over on my bed, mindlessly clicking on a video on my phone. In the space of twenty minutes, I have covered ASMR, cleaning hacks, Illuminati conspiracy videos and kids hilariously tripping over air.

This wasn't how I expected the first day of the holidays to kick off, but the entire summer stretched out before me feels a little overwhelming. What is someone supposed to do with this much free time?

If I had money and a mother who didn't constantly disappear into herself, maybe I would be heading on holiday someplace far flung where problems don't exist. But I don't have either of those things and so I know that, like every summer before this, I have another unglamorous six weeks ahead of me.

The next video starts playing automatically. Something about spending a dollar in the world's cheapest country, but I stop paying attention when my phone buzzes.

THREE MUSKETEERS

Yusuf: King Eddy's at 5 yeahhh we still on?

Another chime.

Muna: only if you've done ur chores lol otherwise mum will fight you

Yusuf: [GIF of a gorilla beating its chest]

Muna: Well done bro good idea!
Gonna forward that to her

Yusuf: NO
Beg u don't gremlin
Gonna clean toilet now brb
@Safiya see you at 5

I laugh under my breath, watching this play out. Muna and Yusuf can always be trusted to stop me feeling sorry for myself. I jump onto the chat to send a reply.

Safiya: U two have got to be the MOST dysfunctional set of cousin-siblings I've ever met

Though the two of them are *technically* cousins, they've grown up together as brother and sister. Yusuf has lived with Muna's family since they were both a year old. He'd lost both of his parents back home in Somalia, because of the war, and was eventually brought here to be raised by his aunt and uncle.

Muna reacts to my message with laughter.

Muna: well if we're the MOST then guess we're doing something right

I roll my eyes. Only Muna would think to dig for a compliment in something intended to be the complete opposite.

Safiya: why are u like this
Ok anyway I'll be outside at 5
catch u later

I switch back to the dollar video. The audio is still playing through my headphones and it seems as though the guy has bought street food that isn't quite agreeing with him.

A moment later, it's interrupted by a muffled noise.

"Hello?" I speak into my empty room, pulling my headphones off one ear. When the knock comes again, I shout, "Come in!" and jump up, tripping over the pile of laundry I'd forgotten was on the floor.

To most people, their mum knocking on their door might seem inconsequential, but here, in this house, it is anything but. To hear my mum knocking on my door, knowing it means she is looking for me, wanting to *talk* to me...

Hooyo's knock is not just a knock. It is a quiet miracle.

The door opens slowly, tentatively, and I scramble up from the floor to see Hooyo standing there.

"Hi, Hooyo," I say breathlessly, rubbing my knee. "Everything okay?"

She blinks once, twice, three times. Opens her mouth and then closes it again. I wait.

I have learned to be patient with Hooyo over the years. I know not to push her too far, to expect too much, because she's too fragile to bear it. So much of the last five years has been dedicated to understanding her and propping her up after my dad left us. I could write a five-hundred-page manual on how to handle Hooyo if I needed to.

There are moments when I try to remember what the precise turning point in our relationship actually was.

Was it when my dad selfishly abandoned us to follow his dreams of extending his business abroad? Or when Hooyo wasted the last of our weekly budget purchasing enough candles to populate a small island because "*They were on sale*" and "*We need this light because your father took ours*", leaving us hungry for two days? Or maybe when she slept through five phone calls from school attempting to inform her that I'd fainted from said hunger and asking if she'd like to pick her daughter up?

Whatever moment it was – whatever day, minute or second – there came a point where I stopped being her only child and became a parent instead.

But still, I remind myself, whatever Hooyo is, at least she stuck around. At least she didn't leave me and go running to the motherland, sniffing for more money.

Hooyo stands in the doorway, looking smaller than ever. Hollow, like everything inside of her has been scooped out. The dark bags under her eyes bring a misery to her face that makes me want to look away and the once rich, brown

complexion of her skin has become ashen. Hooyo's limp hair is laced with grey. She looks as though she has aged a century in the five years since Aabo left.

"Hooyo?" I ask again, trying to tread delicately. "You okay?"
She opens her mouth and I hold my breath.

"Your dad is coming home, Safiya," she whispers, looking down at her feet.

I pull my headphones all the way off to make sure I'm hearing her right. "Aabo is coming home?"

Already my ears are flooded with the rhythmic thump of blood. The chaos of fear and love and hatred.

Hooyo nods but doesn't look up.

I open my mouth to ask the burning questions, but it's hard to sift through the flood in my brain.

Why is he coming back?

Is he back for good?

Is he coming to see us?

Aabo is a topic of conversation that has been too heavy for Hooyo to bear since he left. His name is not uttered in this house. His existence is acknowledged with no words. His life with us is buried in storage boxes in the spare room, while he breathes and lives six thousand miles away.

But even though it might be too much for Hooyo to bear, today I need more. I need to know if what she's saying is really true.

"He's coming back," Hooyo continues before I have a chance to ask anything. Her voice sounds almost completely wilted. "But not for us."

I feel my face knitting itself into a picture of confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He’s returning with his new family from back home apparently...” Hooyo replies, a note of hesitation in her voice. She turns away from me. “A shiny new wife and kids.”

Then, without another word, she stalks into her bedroom.

I stand there, dumbfounded, waiting for her to come back out; to give me something *more*. To fill in the gaps – to answer the wide, gaping questions in the crater left behind by her explosion.

But when the door doesn’t open again, the truth of her words settles like an anchor.

My dad...coming back with a new family.

I slam my own door then, flinging my headphones on my bed.

My hands tremble, and within moments they’re shaking violently like someone has possessed my limbs. I slide down the wall, needing to be close to the ground. I’m panting even though I have barely moved, like I’m running a marathon sitting down.

I have gained and lost Aabo again in the space of seconds. The hiccuping starts first, strangely, before the sobbing does. But the hot tears must do something to me because, before I realize it, I’m on my feet again, overwhelmed with wild, choking fury, and I stumble over to my chest of drawers and then my wardrobe, before diving underneath my bed, disturbing the ecosystem of lost and hoarded items, batting away the dust that flies in my face.

Not there.

My eyes scan the mess of my room, trying to find what I need. Somehow, it's all I can think of right now.

I find the binoculars under the third pile of clothes in the corner of the room and pull my arm back to throw them against the window.

I want it to break. I want everything to break the same way Aabo broke us.