

★ "Moving . . . Kek is both a representative of all immigrants and a character in his own right." —*School Library Journal*

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HOME OF THE BRAVE



PART ONE

When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

—AFRICAN PROVERB

SNOW

When the flying boat
returns to earth at last,
I open my eyes
and gaze out the round window.
What is all the white? I whisper.
Where is all the world?

The helping man greets me
and there are many lines and questions
and pieces of paper.

At last I follow him outside.
We call that snow, he says.
Isn't it beautiful?
Do you like the cold?

I want to say
No, this cold is like claws on my skin!
I look around me.

Dead grass pokes through
the unkind blanket of white.
Everywhere the snow
sparkles with light
hard as high sun.
I close my eyes.
I try out my new English words:
How can you live
in this place called America?
It burns your eyes!

The man gives me a fat shirt
and soft things like hands.
Coat, he says. Gloves.
He smiles. You'll get used to it, Kek.

I am a tall boy,
like all my people.
My arms stick out of the coat
like lonely trees.
My fingers cannot make
the gloves work.

I shake my head.

I say, This America is hard work.

His laughter makes little clouds.

OLD WORDS, NEW WORDS

The helping man
is called Dave.
He tells me he's from the
Refugee Resettlement Center,
but I don't know what those
words are trying to say.

He isn't tall
like my father was,
and there is hair on his face
the color of clouds before rain.
His car is red
and coughs and burps
when he tries to make it go.
Doesn't much like
the cold, either, he says.

I smile to say I understand,
although I do not.

Sometimes Dave speaks English,
the tangled sounds
they tried to teach us
in the refugee camp.
And sometimes he
uses my words.
He's like a song always out of tune,
missing notes.

To help him,
I try some English,
but my mouth just wants to chew the words
and spit them on the ground.

We are like a cow and a goat,
wanting to be friends
but wondering if it
can ever be.

QUESTIONS

We drive past buildings,
everywhere buildings.
Everywhere cars.
Everywhere dead trees.
Who killed all the trees? I ask.

They're not dead, Dave says.
This is called winter,
and it happens every year.
In spring their leaves will come back.
You'll see.

He turns to smile.
His eyes are wise and calm,
the eyes of a village elder.
Your family will be happy
to see you, Dave says,
but he doesn't mean my truest family,
my mother and father and brother.

like a baby sun.
How was the airplane trip?
Dave asks in English.
When I don't answer, he tries again,
using my words:
Did you like the flying boat?

I liked it very much, I say.
I'd like to fly such a boat
one day myself.
When Mama comes,
we'll take a flying boat
around the world.

I don't answer.
I reach into my pocket
and feel the soft cloth
I carry with me everywhere.
Blue and yellow,
torn at the edges,
the size of my hand,
soft as new grass after good rain.

Dave asks, When did you last see
your aunt and cousin?

A long time ago, I say.
Before the camp.

I can tell that Dave
has many questions.
I wonder if all America people
will be so curious.
My mouth is going to get very sore,
stumbling on words all day long.

We stop at a light
hung high in the air,
red and round

Dave turns to look at me.
You know, Kek, he says,
we aren't sure where your mother is.
His voice has the soft sting of pity in it.
We don't know if she is—

She's fine, I tell him,
and I look out the window
at the not-dead trees.
She will come, I say,
and this time
I use my words,
my music.

WHAT THE HECK

We drive down a long road
with many fast cars.
Still there are buildings,
but sometimes not.
I see a long fence
made of old gray boards.
And then I see the cow.

Stop! I yell.
I feel regret in my heart
to use such a harsh sound
with my new helping friend.
Please stop, I say,
gently this time.

What? Dave asks.
What's wrong?

Did you not see her?

The brave cow
in the snow?
Dave glances
in the looking-back glass.
Cow? Oh, yeah. That used to be
a big farm. Lot of land around here's
getting sold off now.
But that farmer's hanging on.

I don't understand his words,
but I can hear that he doesn't
love cattle as I do,
and I feel sorry for him.
I twist in my seat.
The don't-move belt across my chest
pulls back.

Oh, what the heck? Dave says.

I have not yet learned
the meaning of *heck*,
but I can see that
it's a fine and useful word,
because he turns the car around.

GOD WITH A WET NOSE

We park by the side
of the fast-car road.
Walking through the snow
is hard work,
like wading across a river
wild with rain.

The cow is near a fine,
wide-armed,
good-for-climbing tree.
To say the truth of it,
she is not the most beautiful of cows.
Her belly sags
and her coat is scarred
and her face tells me
she remembers sweeter days.

My father would not have stood
for such a weary old woman in his herd,

and yet to see her here
in this strange land
makes my eyes glad.
In my old home back in Africa,
cattle mean life.
They are our reason
to rise with the sun,
to move with the rains,
to rest with the stars.
They are the way we know
our place in the world.

The cow looks past me.
I can see that she's pouting,
with only snow and dead grass
to keep her company.

I shake my head. A cow can be trouble,
with her slow, stubborn body,
her belly ripe with milk,
her pleading eyes that shine at you
like river rocks in sun.

An old woman comes out of the barn.

She's carrying a bucket.
Two chickens trot behind her
scolding and fussing.
The woman waves.

Just saying hello to the cow,
Dave calls.

Let me know if she answers,
the woman calls back,
and she returns to the barn.

We should go, Dave says.
Your aunt is expecting us.

A little longer, I say.
Please?

I know cattle are important
to your people, Dave says.
Again he tries to use my words.
A man I helped to settle here
taught me a saying from Africa.
I'll bet you would like it:
A cow is God with a wet nose.

WELCOME TO MINNESOTA

It's growing dark
when I say good-bye to the cow
and we go back to the car to drive again.
At last we park before a brown building,
taller than trees.
Its window-eyes
weep yellow light.

Under a street lamp,
children throw white balls
at the not-dead trees.
Snowballs, Dave explains.
A smiling girl throws
one of the balls at Dave's car.
He shakes his head.
Welcome to Minnesota, he says.

We climb out of the car.
The snowball girl's face is red

muffled voices of my past.

Much time has come and gone,
but still I know the worn, gray voice
of my mother's sister, Nyatal.
I hear another voice, too,

I laugh. We wait.
The wind sneaks through my coat.
My teeth shiver.
I take off a glove
and hold out my hand,
and at last the cow comes to me.

She moos,
a harsh and mournful sound.
It isn't the fault of the cow.
She doesn't know another way to talk.
She can't learn
the way I am learning,
word
by slow, slow
word.

I stroke her cold, wet coat,
and for a moment I hold
all I've lost
and all I want
right there in my hand.

and her long brown hair is wet.
Hi, she says. I'm Hannah.
You the new kid?
I'm not sure of the answer,
so I make my shoulders go up and down.
Catch, she says,
and she throws a cold white ball to me.
It falls apart in my hands.

I follow Dave across the noisy snow.
Two times I slip and fall.
Two times I rise, pants wet, knees burning.

Take it slow, buddy, Dave says.

Tears trace my cheeks like tiny knives.
I look away so Dave will not see my shame.
How can I trust a place
where even the ground plays tricks?

Inside, we climb up many stairs.
We walk down a long hall,
passing door after door.
Dave knocks on one of them,
and behind it I hear the

the sound of a young man,
a strong man.

The door opens
and my old life is waiting on the other side.

FAMILY

I'm hugged and kissed
and there is much welcoming
from my aunt.
She's rounder than I remember,
with a moon face to match,
her black eyes set deep.

My cousin, Ganwar,
shakes my hand.
I have learned about shaking hands.
At the camp they taught us how:
be firm, but do not squeeze too hard!
Still, when Ganwar grasps my hand
we are like two calves in the clouds
pretending we know how to fly.

The man's voice belongs to Ganwar,
and he has my father's height now,
though Ganwar is thin and reedy

and swallowed my old life whole.

My aunt holds my face in her hands
and I see that she's crying.
I know her to be a woman of many sorrows,
carved down to a sharp stone
by her luckless life.
She isn't like my mother,
whose laughter is

LESSONS

I'll let you get settled, Dave says,
but first I'll give you some lessons.
Your aunt and your cousin know these things,
but you'll need to know them, too.

Number one, he says,
always lock your door.
Ganwar, show Kek what a key looks like.

In my old home,
my real home,
my father kept us safe.
We had no need for locks.

Number two, he says,
this is a light switch.
He pushes a tiny stick on the wall
and the room turns to night,
then blinks awake.

where my father
was sturdy with strength.
His eyes are wary and smart,
always taking the measure of a person.
Six long scars line his forehead,
the marks of manhood
I watched Ganwar and my brother receive
in our village ceremony.
How jealous I had been that day,
too young for such an honor.

I try hard not to look at
another scar,
the place where Ganwar's left hand
should be,
round and bare and waiting
like an ugly question
no one can answer.

The night Ganwar lost his hand
was the night I lost
my father and brother,
the night of men in the sky with guns,
the night the earth opened up like a black pit

like bubbling water from a deep spring.

I look into her eyes
and then my tears come hard and fast,
not for her, not for my cousin,
not even for myself,
but because when I look there,
I see my mother's eyes
looking back at me.

In my old home,
my real home,
the sun gave us light,
and the stars
watched us sleep.

This thermostat, Dave says,
helps keep you warm.
He pretends to shiver
to paint a picture for his words.

In my old home,
my real home,
we were a family,
and our laughter kept us warm.
We didn't need a magic switch
on a wall.

I nod to say yes,
I understand,
but I wonder if I will ever understand,
even if Dave stands here,
pointing and talking
forever.

GOOD-BYES

I'll be going now, Kek, Dave says,
but I'll see you tomorrow.
I smile to show my thanking.

Remember that this'll take time, he says.
It isn't easy to make such a big change.
Things are very different here.

In the camp, I say,
they called America
heaven on earth.

They say many things in the camps, Ganwar says.
You'll see how wrong they were.

Dave shakes his finger at Ganwar.
You behaving lately, buddy?
he asks with a smile.

My aunt answers

so that my new friend Dave
will not worry.
I wonder if he can tell
it is a pretending smile.

Kek, my aunt says,
he's a good boy.
He will try hard
to make his new life work.

I can hear her struggle to
find the English words,
just like I do.

My aunt glances at Ganwar.
You'll see, Dave.
Kek finds sun
when the sky is dark.

when Ganwar doesn't:
He had another fight last week.
Ganwar looks at the ceiling.
At least I won.

I'll talk to your counselor at school, Dave says.
I wonder from his sound if he has said
these words before.

Ganwar and I will go to school together?
I ask with hope.

No, Dave says.
Ganwar is in eleventh grade,
and you will be in fifth.
He pats my back.
Kek, if you need anything,
have your aunt get in touch with me.
I'm always here to help.

I will be OK, I say,
using my best English words.
Soon I will make snowballs.

I make a big grin

Ah, says Dave,
an optimist.

I look away.
I cannot find any sun today, I think.

Dave shakes my hand,
and when the door closes behind him
I'm surprised that I feel afraid,
a little bit.

Dave isn't like my father,
not at all.
But it's been good
to have someone watching over me,
even for just a while.
It's been a long time
since I've known that feeling,