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Lucky

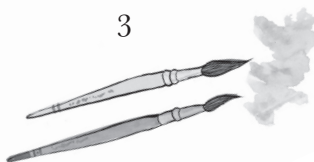
They say I am lucky, the luckiest boy alive. They say that I must be brave and strong to have survived the hardships life has thrown at me, that I have been given a chance for a new beginning and must grab that chance with both hands.

I am lucky, lucky, lucky . . . or so they tell me.

I didn't choose any of this, and new beginnings feel empty and hollow when you have nobody to share them with.

Well, I have my aunt, my uncle and two grown-up cousins I've barely met. But although they have opened their arms and their hearts to me, I cannot do the same. I cannot let myself care any more, because I am not as strong as people think. I am broken, useless, like a piece of damaged pottery

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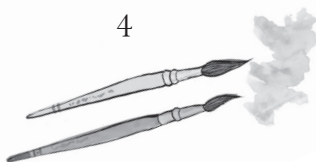
that looks whole but can never be the same again. I look OK on the outside, but inside I am flawed, fractured.

I am not what people think.

I am a fifteen-year-old boy held together with glue and good luck. There will come a time when my luck runs out, and I will fall apart. The world will see that I was damaged and hurting all along, and perhaps people will understand me a little better. Of course, it will be too late by then.

Sometimes I wish that we had never left Syria, even though our city was a war zone, and everyone an enemy. The government my father and mother once respected had turned against the people, and rebels took to the streets to fight back. Then came the extremists, like vultures feeding on carrion, bringing harsh new laws that dragged us all back to the dark ages. We prayed for the west to help us, but when help arrived it came in the form of western bombs that rained down from the skies and destroyed what was left of the place I once called home.

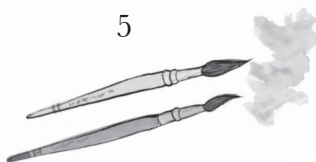
Sometimes I wish that we had stayed in the refugee camp, even though we were crammed three families to a tent, each tent so close they were almost touching. So close that sickness spread faster than wildfire.



I wish we hadn't taken passage on that boat to Kos, but my father said it would be one step closer to Britain, where my mother's brother lived. Uncle Dara and Aunt Zenna would give us shelter. Sometimes I wish I had stopped fighting then and sunk beneath the waves of the Aegean Sea, the way my father, my mother and my sister did.

I was the lucky one.

I swallowed down my grief, carried it inside me, but it was like a parasite that gnawed away at everything that was good. Eventually I got to the mainland and joined a long line of people who were walking across Europe. I walked until the soles of my boots were worn away, until I had gathered a group of kids around me, who like me were travelling alone. We stuck together because it was safer that way, but still we faced danger every day. We grew tough and cynical and ruthless, and we cried silently at night for all that we had lost. At a camp on the Italian border, charity workers tried to find us places to live. I told them I had family in Britain, and after a long wait they managed to trace my uncle and aunt and get me added to the last consignment of unaccompanied refugee minors to be allowed into the UK.



All I knew of my aunt and uncle were the stories my parents had told and a vague idea that they ran a tailor's shop in London. In fact, they didn't live in London at all, and the tailor's shop was actually a dry-cleaner's, but the charity that was helping me back then tracked them down anyway.

I remember the first time I saw Uncle Dara and Aunt Zenna, standing on the pavement outside the shop to welcome me, the nephew they hadn't even known they had. They were older than my parents, but Dara had a look of my mother all the same: dark wavy hair, stern brows, eyes that glinted with the promise of mischief.

'My little sister Yasmine's boy!' my uncle said, anguished. 'After all this time, how can it be? You are welcome here, Sami. We are family, yes?' He threw his arms around me and I felt the dampness of his tears against my cheek.

I was safe.

I was lucky.

I was home.