

## The escort

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Mama woke me with a finger to her lips. I felt her breath on my ear as she whispered instructions. It was the middle of the night, but my eyes were accustomed to the darkness.

Mama had brought her red handbag, my brothers had nothing, and I had stuffed my favourite book, *Abdul and Goat*, in my pocket. We walked along the dusty road in silence for an hour before we saw anyone. The night air was clear and cold. Abba pushed us into a crevice between two bombed houses, their concealing darkness enough for the bad men to drive their dirty truck past without noticing us.

There were lots of people at the boat ramp. The crowd was scary. Mama told us to hold onto each other as we followed Abba, holding paper above his head, through the people to an important looking man on the dock. That man had big gaps between his brown teeth, which showed when he smiled down at me. He spoke in a thunderstorm of words. My arm is still sore from where his hands grabbed me and forced Mama and I onto the blue boat behind him. Apparently, Abba and my brothers would travel on the red boat. The man with the brown teeth dragged my family away as we tried to hold onto each other. Mama screamed. I cried. On the boat there were lots of people, we didn't have any room. Mama was yelling at the man with brown teeth. Soon the boat started and we were moving away from the ramp. One man was trying to jump onto the boat near Mama and I. There was a gunshot and he fell into the water.

On our blue boat no one spoke much. I curled up in Mama's lap and she rocked me back and forth as she prayed. I kissed the tears that rolled down her cheeks. There were all sorts of people on our boat. Mainly men and women but there were a few other children too. The people around us had tried to lay down but we were all on top of each other. Others were being sick into the ocean, our blue boat smelt bad. The waves were scary through the night, we were tossed around and wetted by the cold splash. During the first few hours on the blue boat, I was the most frightened I had ever been in my life.

Once the sun began to rise it was better. I could look out for miles and see the white birds bobbing on the waves. The horizon behind us was dressed in scarves of smoke.

I took out my book, Abdul and Goat, and read it four times including all the prayers between the chapters.

*Abdul and Goat were best of friends. Abdul told Goat everything, including his deepest secrets. One day they were walking along the dirt when Abdul asked Goat, 'What happens when you die?' Goat didn't reply but he bucked his head towards the clouds.*

*The next day, Abdul and Goat were walking through a market. Abdul asked the camel boy, 'What happens when you die?' The camel boy told him he would walk up stairs to a heaven, a garden of eternity.*

*When Abdul and Goat went home for dinner, Abdul asked his father, 'What happens when you die?' His father replied that you fall asleep and wake up in paradise.*

*After dinner, Abdul and Goat sat outside near a very old man with a beard down to his waist. 'What happens when you die?' he asked the man. The man told Abdul that time would stop and a white bird would come as an escort to heaven, a home of peace.*

## THE ESCORT

*'Why do you sit here on the dirt all day long?' Abdul asked. 'I am waiting for the bird,' the man said.*

This chapter confused me. I wondered how all Abdul's friends had different plans for where they'd go when they died.

'Mama,' I asked. 'What happens when you die?'

She turned me in her lap so I was looking straight into her bright brown eyes, then she started crying again and hugged me to her chest. Maybe Mama didn't know.

'Mama, Mama I'm hungry.' Mama told me to be quiet. Then she stood up and walked over to the man with brown teeth. I cried out as he slapped her across the face. The boat went quiet and Mama walked back to me. She told me not to be hungry.

It's night again. Great drops of rain have begun to splash upon the deck of our blue boat. The waves are climbing up out of the ocean and smashing over us. Mama has been praying all night long. I've read some prayers from *Abdul and Goat*, but mostly I've been holding onto Mama and been sick over the edge. Lightning is zipping all around us. As the sky bursts from the clouds, Mama holds me tighter and tells me to pray. So I do. I open *Abdul and Goat* and start reading the prayers out loud. Mama sits still and listens to me. Soon the people around me are listening to Abdul's prayers too. I finish the book quickly, so I turn the pages back, and start again. I read all night until the lightning stops zipping and the waves stop climbing.

I read until Mama stops rocking and the people near me stop crying. I stop when the sky settles, my stomach too. I stop when a white bird lands on the stairs that lead to the boat cabin, I stop when I fall asleep.