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House to Let

by Liz Rider

Citizens of nowhere, and welcomed by no one, Yara felt embarrassed and ashamed. She gazed at the floor of the taxi and swallowed hard to keep her tears in check. Sonia, leaned forward, and said that she could tell Nabil that they would arrive shortly. Squeezing his little hand, Yara said softly 'nahn taqribaan hunak Nabil'. The taxi pulled up in front of a modern row of terraced houses and lifting Nabil onto the pavement, Yara said "this is where we are going to live, Nabil. Look, it has a garden to play in". Nabil smiled expectantly, "Will papa and Nyla be here?" he asked. Kissing the top of his head she whispered, "no darling".

The small front garden was overgrown with weeds and littered with crisp packets and plastic cartons blown from waste bins. A broken 'House to Let' sign was propped against the front door. Yara should have been relieved that she had somewhere to live but instead, she felt her chest tightening and she wanted to run; she tried to breathe deeply and deliberately, as the doctor had suggested. Sonia looked on understandingly and removing the sign, she opened the door. Noticing Yara removing Nabil's small boots, Sonya removed her own. The carpet was sticky and a little damp.

Nabil climbed onto a kitchen chair and gripped the seat, rocking himself and staring at a crack in the wall. Sonia explained the benefits Yara was entitled to while her asylum application was processed; and since she was not allowed to have money, Yara was given a £37.50 Aspen card to be used for food and essentials and be topped up weekly. She was to attend the refugee centre in the morning.

Yara found some basic foods in the fridge. She wasn't sure if the meat was halal but there were enough vegetables for a meal that evening. She found sheets and blankets in a cupboard and made up the two single beds. As she put Nabil to bed, she stroked his hair and sang a lullaby; even at six years old, he found comfort in them.

Thinking he was sleeping, she left the bedroom, but he called out: 'I'm frightened mama' and she carried him to her own single bed, hugged him and they fell asleep. A warm sensation woke her, and she knew that Nabil had wet the bed again. Rising, she removed Nabil's shorts and vest and tucked a hand towel under him. Sleep did not come again that night, and as pale, early morning sunlight filtered through the ill-fitting curtains she gave up trying.

She left the house early to meet Sonia at the Refugee Centre and found comfort in meeting other Syrian women who like her, had been bussed in from London. She stayed until the offices closed for the evening before returning to her new home. Holding Nabil tightly by the hand, she walked back along the street towards the house.

"Paki alert", shouted Pete delightedly as she passed by. "Shut the fuck up Pete, she'll get the message. She'll move out", replied Baz, chuckling mockingly, "the writing is on the wall - well on the door anyway".

Yara felt afraid and started to panic: "I can't remember where we live" she said out loud, trembling. Nabil tugged at her arm, "This is our house mama". Turning, she saw a broken sign nailed to the door, it said: House to Let.