

THE FIRST HORSE

A ten minute piece

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CHARACTERS

LAMIAH - Palestinian, a girl.

Setting: GAZA.

Time: Now.

It's twelve minutes until the race starts. *Jibrail descended from heaven while Ishmael was sleeping.* I let my brother Faheem sleep in. It's still early. He can't hear anything with his headphones in anyway but I still turn the pages of my Tata's book quietly. *When Ishmael awoke a storm hurtled towards him made of sand and rain. He commanded it to stop and where the rain scattered, a prancing creature formed, the most handsome of all, swallowing the storm as it ran.* Tata's drawing of a Bedouin Arabian, tail high, is so faded I can only see it in very bright light. I lay back on my pillow. The first horse, Kuhaylah, was named *Drinker of the Wind*.

I imagine in my desert, there is no wind. The drinking is done. The sun still red hangs, making dust glitter. I use both hands to trace around the bones of his right eye and then the left. Eyelashes so long they tickle my knuckles. I breathe out, into his nostrils like I'd seen the girl do in the movie about diving horses in Atlantic City. She went blind, but I won't. *We will win*, I tell him, *we will win*. Kuhaylah takes in my breath and juts his muzzle into my hands. *Yes*. The others aren't even real Arabians-- they're running on half-engines and metal hooves. Kuhaylah knows too. He swats his thick tail back and forth in anticipation. He knows I have dirt underneath my fingers from hours clinging to his back. He knows we will win. *We must win*. 10 minutes until the race.

--*Lamiah?*!

The dust is clearing, but only just. It's going to be a test of endurance. No saddle, no stirrups, just the beat of thighs on flank. You have to be a horse, watching the dogs run at your feet, knowing you can outrun them----

--*Lamiah?!*

Faheem comes back into the bedroom, waking me from my daydream, his hair wet, his bare feet *slap slap* on the zinc floors. I glare at him. *What are you doing?* Nothing, I say. I hide the book under my pillow. He stares at me longer than I want him to. Maybe he thinks I'm stealing his animal anatomy books again. But I don't need them anymore, I have Tata's stories memorized. *Habeebty! Little cloud...* I'm not a cloud. I'm a storm. *Your sister is ready to go to school. Alia is ready to go. Hurry.*

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The five favorites of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Alia rides on my back half way to school. The other half, we have to both be careful climbing over the shattered concrete blocks and wire like nails long as my sister's hair. It would be impossible for me to ride a horse in this city, the streets are too full of broken things. My brother and I used to go to where the boys race their colts along the beach, hooves spraying dark water. When I finally asked Faheem he said *You can look Habeebty, but you can never ride.* So I stopped looking. Those beach horses are skinny and slow anyway and I have my desert. *A herd of mares were turned loose after a long ride in search of water, the oasis.* Alia likes to hear about The Five; it reminds her of Tata's story-telling. She says them over and over again as we walk: *Keheilan, Seglawi, Obeyan, Hamdani, and Hadban.* The words feel good in our mouths. Alia is back clinging to my shoulders. She making clicking noises and jabs her little heels into my hips, *faster!* I try but I don't want to fall and bury us both. *But just before they reached the water, Alia, the Prophet Muhammad called his horses back to him.* Alia gets down. *But they did not come!* She says. Well, five did. *Keheilan, Seglawi, Obeyan, Hamdani, and Hadban. And they became the Prophet's most prized mares.* I kiss Alia goodbye. She skips away. My school will re-open in a week they say. I look up. 9 minutes until we race. I will have to hurry to make it back in time.

Our sky is no longer quiet. And with every minute it's getting hotter and hotter on my desert. Kuhaylah likes to run at night best. The *thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud thud* of his hooves. You don't tell Kuhaylah where to go, the horse does the work. Horses know how to run and who to run from. I make it back to my room. I heard the screeching dum-dum noise three times coming home. Faheem says they're targeting another part of Gaza, near the beach. I think of the sand being pulled upwards like in the storm sent to Ishmael.

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6 minutes. *From the mist and dust, the Arabian was a gift from God.* I take the drawing out of the book again, I've crumpled it over and over. The picture is gone along the folds and sometimes I take a pencil and color in the places that are too light. *The large forehead was said to hold the blessings of Allah.* Kuhaylah, in the picture, stands on the steep edge of a hillside. There is a man on his back but I know Kuhaylah doesn't like his weight or his leather boots. I would ride bareback and barefoot.

I close my eyes. The desert is hotter than ever. I wipe oil from Kuhaylah's slick coat; I wipe it up my sides and across my face like a mask. *We are one.* Kuhaylah bows his head to let me grab hold of his white mane. I bend my knees once, twice and on the third I jump up and onto his back. My feet barely touch his highest ribs on either side. A flea on the back of a giant. No, not a flea. A tick! I can hold on like a tick and Kuhaylah knows it. *We will run.* The others have mounted too. I lean down and guide Kuhaylah's tall ears back from his face. I tell him that when we win, we are going to keep running, okay? We are not going to stop at the finish line because we have no finish line. We are one and *we will run.*

Kuhaylah paws at the ground and blows a loud raspberry. The vibration fills my body. It shakes the room.

I hide the picture under the pillow again. The room shakes again. I hear my father calling to me from the kitchen. *Under the bed, Habibi!* I shuffle under my sister's bed, my back cold against the ground. The open road is ahead of us, *open road*, open holes in the old mattress above me. Once my mother's arm was opened so wide by flying glass that I could count the veins inside. They tried to sew her back up but some wounds are too big. I hear a *thud*. *A thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud thud*. I turn my head to my left but I can't see where the sound is coming from. Above, I think. The bedroom shakes some more. Then quiet. Then again *thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud thud*. I turn my head to my right and see hooves. Two sets of jet black hooves pawing for me beside the bed. *4 minutes until the race*. I have to go. I reach out and touch a hoof just in case I'm dreaming. *Little cloud, Little cloud*. But the hoof is warm and heavy, the fetlock hairy and slick. I shimmy out from under the bed and look upwards. Kuhaylah bends down and touches his upper-lip to my forehead. It feels two-times more stubble-y than my father's chin in the morning. *Lamiah, Kuhaylah* says, *let's run*.

That night before bed my brother Faheem takes the picture from my hands and looks at it. *It's beautiful, Tata drew many like it* he says. *Do you know where this is?* Yes, I say. It's in the desert somewhere where the horses are strong and fast, probably Saudi Arabia. I'm good at geography. You can run for miles in those deserts. But Faheem shakes his head, *No, Habeebty. Tata always drew from real life. From Jiddo's horses. And this horse? This is a horse from the West Bank. A couple miles away*. I take the drawing back. Kuhaylah looks out at me. But Kuhaylah is free, I say. Faheem smiles, *I like that name. Kuhaylah, a storm-sucker like you! But Kuhaylah is no more free to leave here than the rest of us*. Liar, I say. I call my brother a liar. I have never spoken to him like this before.

Kuhaylah can leave any place and no one can stop us!

RUN

That night, instead of the desert, I run with Kuhaylah down the streets of Gaza city. It rains, the wind beats behind us. We gallop past the empty windows, the hollow doorways, my hair streaming out behind me like Kuhaylah's tail. We leap over iron rope and walls made out of bunk beds and metal beams no longer holding houses up. We run so fast, I know we've won this race. But we keep on running, flying round and round and round until we're so fast you can't see our bodies running anymore.