

It was light when Jamal woke, but no one was moving. Morning should have been the noisiest, the busiest time of day, but nothing, was moving. He sat, trying to decide if he was really awake, looking at the walls of the hut, checking that everything was where it ought to be, straining to hear the sounds of the camp. Straining to hear, what? Listening when there was nothing to hear. Last night's attack was definitely over and the hut seem OK and even better, Jamal was still alive, so that was all good, but the silence was definitely not good. If it was light he should hear children squabbling, uncles finishing their prayers and aunties starting breakfast and hushing their babies, but there was nothing. Jamal shook his head, but he couldn't even hear the ear-buzzing hum that usually followed the bombs. Everywhere was totally, utterly, silent. Jamal realised just how frightened he was; frightened, but not stupid, so he didn't call out, instead he sat perfectly still, holding his breath. He didn't know who was outside and he didn't know the reason for the silence; but Jamal was pretty sure that someone out there had caused it. He also knew that he didn't want to meet them. Jamal had no idea what to do next. He knew that being alone was bad idea, that calling out was a worse idea and that waiting to be found was the worst idea yet. So Jamal sat very still, trying not to breathe, trying to disappear into the shadows and trying to decide what he ought to do next.

As he sat there, hardly breathing, the early morning smoke made him sneeze. Jamal froze; had he given himself away? Slowly he uncrossed his legs, easing the pins and needles from his ankles. If anyone was waiting they'd know where he was, he was on edge. There should be noise and there was still only quiet. Jamal pulled his blanket round him, tightly over his head and loosely over his useless arm. Not a conscious act, an unimportant little habit, but today it was enough to save Jamal's life.

There was too much smoke. It didn't tickle his nose anymore, it was grabbing at his throat, squeezing the air into stomach wrenching coughs. He was choking, gasping acid breaths and suddenly his ears were bursting with noise. He fell to the ground, his blanket falling across his twitching body, as the pick-up drove past, unnoticed. "This one's gone boys, keep the grenades, we're not finished yet."

The truck accelerated up the hill, taking its masked passengers away from Jamal and on to another target.

Jamal's hut was outside the village. Not far outside, he could still hear the talking, see the children playing, even smell the bread baking on the stones, but it was not part of the village. Jamal was unlucky; marked by spirits, he could never enter the compound.

He hadn't been abandoned, chased away from the village like his mother. The Imam had seen to that. He told Jamal's family that Jamal was ill and they had a duty to care for him. But his family didn't want Jamal close, so, as soon as the Imam left, they built a hut outside the compound and Jamal had lived there ever since. Food had been sent out with small children who scampered up the slope to Jamal's hut, skirting in circles to make sure that no shadow from Jamal, or his hut, fell on them. Water was fetched from the well and left in much the same way. Overall, although he was excluded from their society, Jamal's family had ensured that he would, at least, survive.

Now, as Jamal struggled away from his hut and looked towards the compound, he realised that his family would no longer be able to help him. The thorn hedge surrounding the compound was intact. The animals were in the corral and his family were scattered about the compound. Aunties near the fires, children clustered by the huts and his uncles in the centre of the compound, gathered around a bright red canister. To Jamal, only two things were wrong; a dirty yellow vapour was streaming from the canister and everyone in the compound was dead. The smoke, that made Jamal cough and choke in his hut, was partly from the contents of the canister and partly from Aunt Sheema, who had fallen onto the cooking fire. Jamal hesitated, leaving Aunt slowly roasting seemed wrong, but she would not want Jamal to touch her, even to save her from the fire. He hesitated, unsure what to do. Jamal's life had been simple, eat what he was given, keep himself clean, sweep his hut and bury his waste. He had a role in the family, he had to draw bad spirits away from the compound. He would twitch and shake when the spirits came, rolling in his own mess or knocking into the walls. Jamal hated being visited by the spirits, but he accepted his lot. The spirits came to him, punished him and made him ill, but they left his family alone. But that hadn't happened. Jamal had slept soundly as spirits had attacked his family. Ghosts were escaping from the canister and they had killed his family. He stumbled, his eyes burning; smoke and tears stealing his sight. He called out to the ghosts; begging them to leave his family, to come to him; but the ghosts didn't listen, they just hovered in the hollow of the compound, snaking through the huts, hungrily searching for souls. Jamal knew he couldn't help. Soul-Seekers had no use for Jamal, he had no soul.

He turned away, picked up the can that held his water and shuffled east following the churned tracks that the spirits had left. If he found them, what then? Would they listen to him, if they did could his family be saved, or had the ghosts already taken their souls? He had no plan, for as long as he could remember his family had cared for him and he had protected his family. Now he had nothing, so he walked. His red blanket and a copy of the Qur'an, that he could hardly read, were the only familiar things in this unfamiliar world.

### **A Walk Across Sand.**

Jamal was hungry. His family had died before breakfast so nothing had been brought up to his hut. He knew that the aunties picked plants to put in the stews, but they had never taken Jamal with them to pick herbs. He didn't know which plants he should eat so he didn't eat any of them in case they made him sick. Maybe he could find another family who were plagued by spirits. A people who would look after Jamal if he kept the ghosts away. Jamal thought that would be his best plan. He would have to go a long way from home because anyone who knew that his family had died wouldn't want him to stay.

He could see a compound, about an hour's walk away. There were no signs of people, no smoke, no goats, no noise. It looked abandoned, or worse, but Jamal needed help, so he pushed through the scrub towards the huts. The spirit tracks were less clear, but they were there. Wherever the red dust broke through the rocks Jamal could see the spirits' tracks. Shivering, he pulled his blanket tighter over his

shoulders. The air seemed stuck in his chest, whistling and wheezing as he forced each breath. He felt as if one of the spirits had its hand on his shoulder, pushing him to the ground. He pulled his blanket across his face, breathing the familiar smells wool and smoke, keeping the ghosts away from his mouth. He wanted to reach the compound, there would be water there, but between him and the compound were more ghosts. They were snaking up the hill towards him and Jamal knew he had to leave before the ghosts smothered him like they'd smothered everyone else. He struggled, trying to stand, then taking one step, then another, trying to escape into the fresh air while all the time the ghosts were grabbing at him, pulling him back to where everything had died. The comforting taste of his mother's blanket between his teeth protecting him from the evil intentions of the ghosts as he forced his legs forward. Step, stagger, stumble, step; slowly escaping back up the hill where the ghosts couldn't reach. As he got further from the plain Jamal reached the steps that were cut into the mountain. It was an old path, a twisty path, that snaked across the mountain like a liana stretching between the trees. It was the slowest way to climb the mountain, rising one step for every five or six that you took, but it was an easy climb. Old people, sick people, fat mummies and small babies, they all used the steps while the young and the strong clambered over the rocks and pushed through the bush. Jamal was tired and thirsty, his eyes were sore and his throat was dry. He wanted to stay on the path. The steps seemed welcoming, but they weren't, the ghosts had been here too. They were gone now, those soul-seekers. Right in front of Jamal, before the steps really started they had left one of their red canisters. The Ghosts had gone. None of the yellow trails or choking odours remained, but they had definitely been here. Jamal hesitated. He wanted to see the red canister. To know more about the ghosts and what they were looking for. He also wanted to stay alive. Was there a ghost still in the canister, waiting for the others to return. Maybe waiting for another soul to steal. After all everyone else who had been here was dead, their souls had already gone; but Jamal had not soul, he ought to be safe. He wanted to know, he was afraid to know. Jamal stood rocking backwards and forwards, not sure what to do next. He sat on the ground, feeling very alone, wanting to cry. The world, or at least this part of it, seemed so unfair. It was unfair, so unfair that Jamal couldn't even cry he was too thirsty, his body wouldn't waste precious water on tears. Before he could feel sorry for himself he would have to find something to drink. But first he would look at the red canister. This was where the ghosts lived. If Jamal wanted to stop the ghosts misbehaving, he would have to find out why they had come. He knew that if anything was left inside the canister it would kill him, but it was time to be brave, to be a man. If Allah willed it, Jamal would die. If he did not, Jamal would live and maybe stop the ghosts from killing anyone else. Jamal edged forward, tapping the canister with a stick. It rolled away, reached the edge of the first step, waited, then toppled onto the soil. The sound, bell-like and innocent, echoed from the mountains. The unnatural, tinny sound reminding Jamal how quiet the bush had been.

### **Secrets and Stories**

The first thing about the canister that Jamal noticed was that it was not completely red. It had signs and marks all over it. It had writing on it too. But the writing wasn't

clear and Jamal couldn't read, nobody had taught him. He understood the pictures though. There was a fish with a line through it. Not a very good fish, more like the carvings that children make, or the beads that you sometimes found hidden in the soil. It was definitely meant to be a fish but Jamal was not sure why it was crossed out. Was it bad for fish, or made from fish and the cross was meant to be a fishing net? There were other pictures too, a tree, some bones and a cross. It was an odd mix of pictures. What story were they trying to tell? Maybe if you caught fish in a net, then the ancestors who lived in the trees would be angry? Maybe if you didn't catch fish then the ghosts would come and haunt the trees. Or were the ghosts looking for fish, or trees or bones. What good were pictures if they didn't make sense. Pictures were meant to tell stories, that was the point of pictures, if you couldn't read, the pictures told you a story. Jamal guessed that these pictures were meant to confuse. The ghosts had secrets and they only wanted the right people to understand them. Jamal knew that he wasn't one of the right people. He remembered that his grandfather lived in these mountains, in a hut or a cave, away from everyone else. The Aunties had said that Jamal's grandfather was a powerful man, they were afraid of him. If he was very powerful and if Jamal could find him, would he understand the story on the canister? If they knew what story was being told, maybe they go give the ghosts what they were looking for. Then they might go away.

Jamal had two, no three, problems that he needed to solve before he could even think about looking for his grandfather.

Jamal needed to find water. He needed to do that before he did anything else. Then he needed to find something that would hold the red canister. Jamal knew that he would never be able to take the canister to grandfather if he had to carry it in his arms. Then he had to find grandfather and that was the worst thing that he had to do. Between Jamal and the top of the mountain were all the people that the ghosts had killed he would have to find a way to get around them, or over them. Jamal was pleased that he didn't have solve that problem quite yet. He would leave the red canister where it was and go hunting for water. There was a stream near the steps, it lead down to the river but the fish and the frogs were that should be swimming there had all died. The birds that had been feeding on the frogs had all died and had fallen in the stream. Jamal wondered if the ghosts were swimming in the river among the dead things. Even the wriggling mosquito larva were dead. If the ghosts were so hungry that they had taken the life from mosquitos, then they would surely take Jamal's life if he drank from the river. Jamal looked around. There had to be something to drink, there were so many people here they wouldn't all have been thirsty. There was no market here, the people had not come to shop, they'd come to the mountain. As Jamal looked around he saw that someone had been selling drinks, Sprite and Fanta in small bottles, juices in packets. Jamal walked towards the ice-box and the drinks. He wasn't quite sure what he should do. He needed a drink. He had drunk the water from his water can a long time ago, before he had left the spirit tracks, early this morning. But he had no money and nothing to sell. He couldn't just take the drinks, that would be stealing and that was wrong. He couldn't manage without a drink, he was too hot and he'd walked too far. He looked at the ice box, he looked at the drinks and he looked at the Auntie, half fallen from her stool. He was worried again, he returned to rocking, back and forward. It was as if he was he was

trying to pull the answers from somewhere deep inside of him, But the answers stayed hidden. Jamal needed someone to tell him what to do. He was an unlucky child, a spirit boy, not someone who had to make decisions.

Jamal looked around, the spirits were returning, he was sure of it. He could smell the sweet nutmeg on their breath and hear their voices buzzing in his ears. He sat down, leaning against the trunk of a tree, keeping himself hidden, even though he knew that the spirits would still find him. Jamal was still thinking about the bottles of sprite in the cold box when the spirits wound their smoky selves around his eyes and he sank into an uneasy blackness.

The spirits tortured Jamal for most of the day. He woke when the sun had almost burnt itself out. He woke to something else as well. Flies. There were flies everywhere, filling the air and settling on the bodies. The ghosts must have been satisfied at last. That's good, Jamal thought, I couldn't stop the ghosts from coming but at least I've chased them away. The mountain might come back to life, even if all the people wouldn't. Just then Jamal heard swifts chattering about the sudden feast of flies. Other birds would be here soon, and animals, if they had escaped the ghosts, and Jamal wanted to be away from here before they came. Jamal had no time think how he would pay for his drinks from the drink seller. As he looked at her covered in flies and their black-tipped eggs he knew she wouldn't need any payment. Even if he caught the ghosts she wouldn't want to be chased back into this body. He pushed as many dinks as he could into a cloth and tied it, like a lumpy baby, to his back. He then opened one last bottle of Fanta, holding the bottle with his toes as he did. Jamal drank the sticky liquid then threw down the bottle. Maybe, if another boy came along he would be able to pick up the bottle and sell it, but Jamal wanted to get onto the mountain before the sun went and the wild dogs came.