

By Naya Sabet

Bāba pressed me tight against his chest as the distant gunfire ricocheted off the crumbling walls of the safe house. The sharp cracks were an unwelcome lullaby – one Beyza and I learned not to flinch at. Māmma’s (Mother) whispers filled the darkness while Bāba’s (father) tired eyes watched the door.

This night was different.

With shaking hands, Māmma (Mum) and Bāba (Dad) bundled us into the crowded white van, the one that would carry us across borders and into a different life. The engine rumbled to life. I twisted in my seat, eyes wide, as Māmma and Bāba faded behind a blanket of dust. A silent goodbye hung in the air, fear still etched on our faces.

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The scent of Vegemite toast pulled me back now, winding up the timber stairs to Beyza and I. Beyza slipped on her perfectly pressed dress as she ran her hands down the navy tie. Her hair was tied into two neat plaits with ribbons to match the baby-blue trim of her dress. Māmma had taught me how to braid, and one day I too would teach Beyza. But for now, she just danced into the mirror smiling at her new Prep uniform for the first day of school.

I watched from the doorway, already dressed in my more subdued Year 4 uniform, my heart wrenching. Māmma and Bāba would be relieved to know I’m taking care of her. A brand-new school in a brand-new country. Our foster family, Nancy and Dan Richards, had no children of their own, but they had open arms for us. Nancy, an art teacher with a voice that coloured the room, and Dan, a mechanic whose hands were always stained dark brown.

“Oya, Beyza! Come down for brekkie!” Nancy called.

“Coming!”

I hurried Beyza down the stairs.

“Last one to the table’s a rotten egg!” we chuckled .

We sat at the table with our orange juice and Vegemite toast—our usual breakfast since arriving in Australia. The saltiness felt strange on my tongue, a far cry from our favourite Lavashak omelette, but I was starting to get used to its bitter kick.

“How do you guys like Vegemite on toast?” Dan asked.

Māmma would’ve scolded us if we said how we truly felt, so Beyza and I looked at each other and grinned, nodding with full mouths. The longing in Nancy’s eyes made it much easier to bare. Her eyes were kind and warm, wanting nothing but safety for us both.

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A gentle smile greeted us at the gates of the new school.

“Welcome! I’m Mrs Winter and this is Nadia. She will show you around today Oya, while I look after you Miss Beyza”.

Beyza’s small hand slid into mine. I squeezed it tightly as we walked. Sunlit classrooms stretched out in every direction; a giant green oval shimmered under the heat.

Inside, the classroom buzzed – low whispers and darting eyes. I stumbled over my words, English words tripping as they escaped from my mouth. Chuckles skittered through the room before being abruptly broken by the lunch Bell.

Despite class being over, I could feel the whispers following me down the hallways.

“Can we get you a *Turkey* sandwich for lunch today?” Some kids called out.

I began to shrink inside myself. Their words piled on top of each other like the bricks of my old home—heavy, broken, hard to carry. I didn’t answer. My throat felt tight.

Before I could slip further away, Nadia appeared beside me – steady, certain.

“Leave her alone,” she said sharply. “Mrs Winter won’t be happy to hear about this.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me down on the stone bench beside her, shielding me from the rest of the hallway noise.

After school, Mrs Winter called me to her desk. Her face was stern. My stomach twisted.

She let me stand in silence for a few seconds before placing in front of me a worn, leather-bound book—*The Diary of Anne Frank*. “She was young, like you,” she said. “She felt out of place. But she found her voice. And you will, too.”

That night, I read it cover to cover. Anne’s words curled around me like a warm hug. She was trapped by walls, but not by hope. I wasn’t trapped. Maybe I could hope, too.

The next morning, Mrs Winter read one of my poems aloud in class – one I had written quietly in the margins of my notebook.

“You’re lucky to have Oya here,” she said, warmly. “She sees what others miss.”

At assembly, she asked me to share a poem I wrote—in both English and Turkish—about finding home again.

My voice trembled at first.

But when I finished, there was a stillness in the hall, a listening.

The stares softened into smiles.

The coldness I had carried all this time began to thaw.

By the week's end, my book was brimming with poems, scraps of hope on every page.

I had found a way to speak.

And sometimes, it only takes one person to make room for your voice.

I may not have my whole family. Māmma and Bāba are still half a world away.

But I have Beyza's little hand gripping mine, Nancy's burnt toast and Dan's clatter in the shed. I have Mrs Winter's belief when my own faltered, and Nadia's quiet defiance when the world turned sharp.

It isn't perfect and it isn't everything we lost. But it's ours, and for now, that's enough.