

The Words for Go Away
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Overview

The Words for Go Away covers a period of time between the mid-1970s through to the 1980s and beyond, during which the narrator passes from childhood into adolescence.

The memoir opens in an undisclosed location in the Middle East. As a child, the narrator lives a life of unconstrained freedom, running barefoot with wild dogs, practising her improvised rough magic at the edge of the desert, occupying empty swimming pools and buildings sites, and reading her books late into the night, whilst the adults in her world drink and argue and party and work.

This existence comes to an abrupt end when at the age of 11 she is sent back to the UK for schooling. Money is short and the right arrangements have not been made: she is sent to live with a variety of strangers in a sequence of bewildering dislocations, until she finds herself in a cold and punitive school, where she is effectively forgotten.

She is just as abruptly taken out of school when her mother takes pity on her and the money runs out. She returns to the Middle East, but her sense of alienation does not leave her. She finds herself in an unfamiliar house with little furniture and somebody else's parrot in the front room. She has a bed in the corner of the living-room, where there is no escape from the family dramas playing out around her.

There is now no school to attend. She lives in the margins of a marriage that is breaking down, where nothing is stable and where drink is the primary locus of a good life.

Isolated and sensitive, she tries to make herself 'fit,' but finds she has become invisible. Full of a sense of loss, she cannot get back into the world she once occupied, as the family dynamic breaks down and protests erupt in the political sphere around them. Eventually, fleeing debt, they return to the UK.

The second part of the memoir looks at the consequences when unprocessed grief and dislocated childhoods pass through generations, and patterns repeat. Beneath the surface of arguments, abuse, and alcohol, lie deeper, more tragic secrets that are not spoken about. She tries to name and understand them, so that she might break the cycle and re-occupy her life.

This is a memoir looking at themes of identity, feminism, childhood, and inter-generational grief. Whilst chronological in its structure, the fragmentary format relates to the difficulty in creating an integrated narrative when there is hidden trauma within the family system.

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Soon after we got here we learnt the words for *go away*. There are two words for go away and one of them is stronger than the other. Also, we learnt the words for *yes* and *no*, and how to count to four. I do not remember the word for *please* but I do remember the word for *thank you*.

The Pink and White House

Our house is at the edge of the desert. It is pink and white. Opposite and next to us, there are other pink and white houses in rows.

No-one lives in them yet.

At the end of the sandy road there is the tarmac road.

Few cars go by.

Now and again, lorries pass, back and forth, carrying boulders. The boulders and the lorries are so large the ground vibrates. They travel in a cloud of dust.

They are taking stones to the place at the end of the tarmac road where the road ends and the sea begins. There, they are making a new port.

When we can't think of anything else to do, we go to look. Machines are working along the edge - sucking and spewing, dredging and excreting, turning the sea into land.

The house smells of cement dust and tile grout.

There are no pictures on the walls and there are no carpets. When you turn on a tap, water clatters.

We must not drink the water from the tap.

We can only drink the water from the water filter.

There is nothing soft about our house, apart from us. We are soft.

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I try to get my feet hard.

I stand on the burning sand and count. My brother watches. I pull a face of agony and move my arms up and down like a bird. But I do not move my legs until the heat has gone through the soles and into the flesh, has moved into the deep inside of them, and there is no choice but to stop.

We run over the burning sand, towards the melting tarmac.

Beyond, the air is shimmering like water.

Rich

We look for cardboard in the rubbish at the edge of the desert. Large pieces, unstained, which do not smell and are not too bent. Whole boxes and single inner layers.

In the still heat, we make a palace against the back wall. There is an inner chamber and a bedroom, and a long corridor through which we enter and leave. It smells of warm box and dust. We sit in our cardboard palace and smooth the sand of its floors and scoop it up in handfuls. We pour it over our arms and legs and feet, letting it run down and over us, laughing as it leaves slipping, fragmentary crescents and curves and catches in the hairs of our legs. *Pretend that it is gold*, we say.

Bread

At lunchtime we are sent for bread. We run without shoes.

There is a stretch of shadeless sand around the house and I try to beat the heat of this sand. I run fast but it is deep and slows me down. When I get to the palm tree on the other side, I grasp it and cool my feet in its thin crescent of shade. Next, we run to a line of shadow beneath a wall. It makes us laugh and nearly cry.

We have to jump the open sewers on the way to buy the bread and in certain places, near certain buildings, there are rich bad smells.

Sometimes we see dead rats lying near the path, their mouths downturned, their small teeth showing in a look of terrible blank distaste.

The bread-place is a house with no front wall. The bread men stare as we step in.

They are furious and concentrated in the heat.

Araba, shukran, I say and smiling hold four fingers up, but the bread-makers do not smile as they place the dough on the sides of the bread oven and nobody looks at us until the bread is done and one of the bread-men hands it to us rolled up in newspaper.

The hot bread burns through the paper. We run, run, over the burning sand, with the burning bread in our hands, leaping the sewers, and glancing again at the dead rats, and the sun is higher now, there are no other people in the back alleys or on the roads. We run until we are back in our kitchen, with its smell of fly-spray and fridge, itchy with sweat, and the fly-screen bangs behind us.

And then we eat. The bread tears softly. It has its taste of a deep warm wheat, a little of newspaper. We eat the bread with butter melting over it, with shards of sweet pink ham, torn. It is like a secret we have discovered, this bread from a place that has no address.

The Water Place

Once a week, we collect drinking water from the water place, taking our empty canisters, blue and green. We hold them under the taps, near to where women wash robes in channels of dark flowing water. We go to the supermarket to buy white bread and fly-spray, Hershey bars and milk, and

on to the souk, whose rich smells of the rotten and the fresh I half like, and half distrust.

Each day we take malaria tablets and salt pills, and every fortnight my mother checks the battery water and the oil, and once a week she takes us to the sea, and on Fridays, to the Club.

And still there are cavities in each day, when the fridge shudders suddenly in ecstasy and then falls quiet. When water drops from the filtering tank and a car in the distance accelerates, shifts gear. When sun falls down upon the world and the world is shown to be nothing but unpolished molecules of dust shimmering in the temporary shapes of towers and office blocks and sand.

The Idea of Home

On the high wall, between the desert and our garden, we walk as if on a tightrope. At first we are slow. We feel the height of the wall pulling at us, making us doubt. Each step is a decision, the muscles in our legs and sides moving under our skin like buried fingers, holding us in place. We practice getting faster and faster until we can run and execute a switching sequence of jumps, flashing into new being - I am a witch - you are my boy - I am a queen –

Mum stands below. She does not notice the shapes we make but we leap as though she might.

I know that if I were to jump up and down, as high as I can, she will see me seconds later, not as I do it. However much I try, I cannot get her into the same moment that I am in.

She is thinking about spring: a broad-brush stroke of bright green and fast watery yellow light and the smell of damp earth and a bird singing.

When she speaks it is as though there is a piece of moss stuck in her throat.

The fly-screens are closed over the windows. The light has become high-pitched. Our pupils have contracted to the most secretive of circles.

Never Built Palaces

'All the sheiks want palaces', Dad says. 'Of course, they'll never build them. They just want the designs to show off to each other. Each has to have a palace bigger than the rest.'

Dad works at his drawing board in the spare bedroom. He prints out blueprints elevation by elevation. The fluid he uses is made of ammonia; a smell of damp alkaline, of cat piss, frying kidney, hairdressers. He hangs the prints to dry with miniature pegs on wires across the room. He keeps the door open to let out the smell. When we reach the top of the stairs we see his back leaning over the drawing board, his pink wealed heels rising out of his slip-ons, his hand reaching out for his cigarette, placing it back in the ashtray, and reaching out again for his cigarette, and he feels us there and says without looking up, *I'm not telling you again.*

Veli comes to clean. He swashes floor tiles that look like sliced pistachio nuts and sprays at the flies in sudden sparkling clouds of chemicals.

In the middle of the table in the dining-room there is a silver dish in which oranges are placed simply for their colour.

A tall, regal man in a fluttering white thobe visits. He stands in the hallway. Shy, I examine his toes. They are chubby and clean and covered in black, definite hairs. He is approving, sceptical, amused. He laughs and nods at us, *the children*, with raised eye-brows.

When he talks about the Emir his slaps a hand onto his chest: 'like a father', he says. 'Our father' the *a* is rich, rolled, guttural, deep, the end of the word clipped, as though *father* is a path with a ditch in it, a sudden falling down a hole, and a righting of yourself again.

As he passes, he releases an intense and woody smell, like the inside of a treasure-box.

White Land Rovers

Opposite, a family has moved in. They are the Churches. Debbie and Rob Church, and the children, Gemma and Ethan and baby Matthew. Their house is the same as ours but the other way round. Their house does not echo. They have a T.V. and a sofa. They have small, fringed carpets next to their beds.

Debbie has long hair parted in the middle. She ties it back in a pony tail. She wears pink varnish on her finger and toe nails and she wears clothes that she has ironed. These are often t-shirts and denim skirts.

At tea time, Debbie gives the children mashed banana sprinkled with sugar.

Every morning she brushes Gemma's hair in the kitchen. I know this because I have looked through the keyhole into their kitchen.

Gemma sits on a chair and Debbie brushes it over and over, and Debbie isn't wearing any clothes, not even knickers. She brushes up a bunch to keep Gemma's hair off her face and she fastens it with a plastic bobble so that there is no fringe, and a small tuft on top.

Gemma and Nathan have water flasks with pictures on them, and cups with handles on the top.

I like the way Debbie does things: the way she rinses out the flasks and turns the caps on them, with her hands, the nails pink.

Rob works in the power station. His thick curly hair, sometimes dense and shiny with grease. His arms have strong muscles.

Rob has planted banana plants in the garden and put up swings. He has made the swing-frames out of long steel poles. A hosepipe coils through the sand to water the banana plants. The water turns the sand dark brown, almost like earth. I go round to play every day.

Gemma and Nathan share a room. They have a cupboard full of toys. There is a play-mobile bus and aeroplane, a car-park, and play-mobile people. There are dolls and a telephone. When we have finished playing, Debbie tells us to put the toys away.

They have a television and a sofa made of brown plastic with cushions. On special evenings, when the reception is good, we watch cartoons. Debbie gives us mashed up banana with sugar in it. I watch Dr. Who sitting on their brown plastic sofa. I feel scared, safe.

They have a Land Rover. It is white with black seats. Inside, it has metal walls and four-wheel drive and you feel high up when you sit in it. When Rob drives, the muscles in his arms show in lines when he turns a corner or changes gear. It is safe, like watching television on the sofa, or watching someone run a bath, or being told to tidy the toys up.

I would like a white Land Rover.

Blue Pick-up

Each morning a man comes in a light blue pick-up truck to take us to school. We sit in the back on the metal floor and hold on to the sides. He drives fast down the track through the compound. It is full of lumps and holes and we are jerked up and down. It is important to hold on. On the proper roads, the journey is smooth and full of wind and speed. We point our faces forwards so the air blows our hair the right way, not across our eyes. We can see the back of the driver's head through a small window of glass. His hair is black and motionless. It shines like the feathers of a crow.

Mum offers the pick-up truck lift to the children opposite. In the morning, Rob helps them up, over the edge of the pick-up truck, with their lunch boxes and flasks, their legs in white socks. 'Sit right down, right down, and hold tight - *here*' he tells them. 'Do not let go.' As we drive to school, we smile at them, but they look puzzled. They do not smile back. They do not say why, exactly, but they do not come with us again.

Learning to Swim

Before, I could not swim. Now I can swim.
I taught myself when no-one was looking.
I stayed near to the edge of the pool.

Debbie had taken us to the pool at the army base.

Debbie was with the man who lives at the army base, who had invited us to use the pool. They were getting changed in his bedroom.

I made myself swim one stroke after another without holding the side.

The pool in the army base has no shallow end. It is all deep.

I thought it was important to try to swim properly, because otherwise I might die.

I did one, two, three, four, strokes, and I did not touch the side.

I did it again.

I did a whole length of the pool in the army base where there is no shallow end, where giant inner tubes float.

I went to tell Debbie what I had done: that I had taught myself to swim.

She was still getting dressed and the man who lives at the army base was also getting dressed. Debbie said, 'we'll be there soon, we're just changing.' And it was true that they were still changing. I could see his penis and the black patch of hair in his groin and her breasts.

I went back to my swimming in the army base pool. There, the water seemed green, not blue. It was adult water. It was the water of men.

The Moth

Mum took a melon seed one day and pushed it into the sand beneath the drip from the bedroom air-conditioner and it has sprouted, first into a double leaf, and now, into something sprawling and green and alive. It is the only thing growing in our garden. It is on this, that the moth lands. The moth is something of extraordinary beauty. We did not think it possible, that a creature could be so beautiful. It does not fly away. Perhaps it is tired, and is resting on the melon plant. Perhaps it saw the melon plant from the sky, or smelt it, or sensed it in some way. I call Mum and then she says to call Dad and Dad comes to look and then goes back in to fetch his camera to take a photograph. Its wings are huge, camouflaged in soft purples and greens and pale dun browns. These are *exactly* the colours Mum likes.

Perfect Ten

I practise handstands and crabs. I go up, then down. I go up, then down. I want to be able to stand, very still, on my hands. To be able to hold myself there for as long as I wish to be upside down. Also, I want to be able to walk on my hands. I want to move from a handstand and over onto my feet and up with the movement of a slinky, in the shape of a rainbow. I can see just how I want to be. I need to practise. Up, then down. I leave grey marks along the wall with my dirty outside feet. 'Will you *stop*,' says Dad. I want to be the kind of girl who could achieve a perfect ten.

Servants Quarters

In the corner of the garden, there is the room that is called the servants quarters. No-one lives in the servants quarters. Inside, there is a small basin and a tap. The basin is so small, it might be possible to wash one hand in it, but there is not enough room for two, or a face. When I turn the tap, there is no water but there is an electric shock. It travels up my arm, along my jaw, into my teeth and tongue, with a zizzy feeling. I pick up a metal pole. As soon as the pole touches the tap, the electric feeling travels along it and into my hands, up my arm again, and down into my feet. I drop it.

The empty servants quarters has become a place of magic, the place to perform spells.

I use the pole, and I touch the tap, and then I touch my brother, anointing him with the power, chanting the magic.

Over and over again, I chant.

The room is full of its strange emptiness, its miniature sink, glassless windows, no door.

It is so full of nothing, it is frightening.

I tell my brother he, too, can fly.

I can fly already. I fly when no-one is looking.

My brother believes he can fly. He is full of this knowledge. It has entered into him, stronger even than my own belief.

For a while, I have given him this power. For an hour or less, he knows he can fly. He thinks this about himself, until he falls from the high wall, and bleeds.

A short from the above excerpt appeared in *Flash: the international short short story magazine*, Volume 7 No 2, 2014.