Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Words in the Dust

Written by

Trent Reedy

Published by

Frances Lincoln Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Text copyright © 2011 by Trent Reedy
Translations on pages 56, 121-2, 156, 214 and 253
copyright © 2011 by Scholastic Inc.
The right of Trent Reedy to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988 (United Kingdom).

First published by Arthur A Levine Books, an imprint of
Scholastic Inc., in 2011
First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 4 Torriano Mews,
Torriano Avenue, London NW5 2RZ
www.franceslincoln.com

Excerpts from *Yusuf and Zulaikha* and *The Shahnameh* were newly translated for this book by Roger Sedarat, a professor of poetry and translation at Queens College in New York City. www.sedarat.com

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electrical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the United Kingdom such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-84780-271-2

Set in Palatino

Printed in Croydon, Surrey, UK by CPI Bookmarque Ltd. in July 2011

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

1

I traced the letters in the dust with my finger, spelling out my name: *Zulaikha*. Squinting my eyes in this middle time between night and morning, I checked to make sure my brothers and sister were still sleeping. Then I began to write the alphabet. *Alif, be, pe, te*… What was the next letter?

I wriggled my fingers in the cool brown powder before I swept out what I'd written. "I'm sorry, Madar-jan," I whispered, hoping that somehow her spirit could hear me. "I'm forgetting what you taught me."

My sister, Zeynab, still slept on her toshak next to mine. Her shiny, straight black hair draped over her smooth, round face and her pretty mouth. She licked her lips in her sleep. No matter how many times I looked at her, I was always fascinated by her beauty, wishing I could be even half as pretty as she was. I found my blue chador and pulled it up over my face. It needed a wash, smelling of salt and smoke.

Roosters crowed, and a few dogs barked. The small city of An Daral still slept, but not for much longer.

"Allahu Akbar," came the voice of the muezzin over the speaker a few streets away, calling the faithful to prayer. The day had begun.

Zeynab rubbed her eyes. "Ooooh, so early." She turned to Khalid and Habib, who stirred on their toshaks. "I wish I was still young enough to stay sleeping."

I didn't say anything, but poured water from a pitcher into a tub to perform wudu' and cleanse myself for prayer. Zeynab did the same, and then we faced west on our rugs and went through our prayers, standing, bowing, sitting, and always giving thanks and praise to Allah the most merciful. This was the best prayer of the day. Soon Allah would bring the sun up behind us and touch us with its warmth.

After we rose from our prayer rugs, Zeynab went right back to her toshak to sleep. I never understood what she gained from maybe two minutes more of sleep time. I turned to watch the morning glow, the golden pink swell of light building behind the mountains to the east.

In the name of Allah the most merciful and his prophet

Muhammad, peace be upon him, I give thanks for this new day and ask help so that I can be a daughter my mother would have been proud of. So that I might be a blessing and not a burden to my father. Then I added as I always did, *And please grant me peace with Malehkah.*

With my personal prayers finished, I stepped over to my sister and gently shook her shoulder.

Zeynab groaned. "Come on, Zulaikha, just a bit longer. Malehkah hasn't even called for us yet."

I tugged her sleeve. "Like the muezzin says, prayer is better than sleep."

She yawned. "Maybe I pray in my sleep. In my dreams."

"You don't mean that," I said. "Anyway, Malehkah will already have the tea and rice ready. She'll be—"

"Zulaikha. Zeynab." Malehkah's sharp voice cut through the morning stillness and echoed off the compound walls. She did not like it when we kept her waiting. This was true.

"Zeynab," I said, though her name always sounded more like Zeynav when I said it. "Let's go."

I started for the stairs that led down into the house, but then I saw that my little brother Khalid had twisted out of his blankets. Even though he was nearly nine years old, he slept more restlessly than

two-year-old Habib. When I moved his blanket up to cover him, he put his thumb in his mouth and reached for me with his other hand. I smiled and smoothed his hair as I pulled away.

"Go back to sleep, bacha," I whispered. "I'll have something for you to eat when you wake up."

Malehkah waited at the base of the stairs. "What took you so long getting down here? Zeynab, look after the rice." She nodded in my direction, her hands wrapped around her bulging stomach as if to protect her unborn baby from me. "Zulaikha, go and buy some naan. Hurry. Your father and Najibullah are hungry."

I pulled my chador up over my head, slipping the end around to cover my face. Malehkah didn't like looking at my mouth.

"Don't you be talking to any shop boys either. It will be hard enough trying to find a husband for you some day without people thinking you're too eager." My father's wife held out a dirty, wrinkled one-hundred Afghani note. "And bring back the extra money. Remember, thieves lose their hands."

"Yes, Madar." Even though I'd had to say this for years, it still hurt to refer to my father's second wife as mother, especially when she was being so mean. I'd never stolen in my life, and I certainly never said

more than was necessary to any shopkeepers. It didn't matter. Whatever I did, Malehkah was always mad at me. Still, I had to try to please her, to prove to her that I wasn't so terrible, and to make peace in my father's house.

When my madar, my real mother, still lived, life with Malehkah was better. Or maybe I was just so young that everything seemed better. Madar-jan had been kind to Malehkah, helping her adjust to life with us and always placing the needs of the family ahead of her own. But I don't know how or why my mother had been so nice to her. I thought about what she always said whenever I was upset: "'Every triumph from patience springs, the happy herald of better things.'"

As I made my way across the front courtyard, I tried to open myself to everything around me. I felt the smooth, soft dust between my toes, and I listened to the sound of the breeze whispering and rattling through the palm leaves of our date tree. I noticed all the deep blues, greens, and reds painted onto the elaborate, metal double door at the front of our compound. I took in the old brown smell and the warmth of the thick mud-brick wall that protected us from everything outside. Madar-jan would have

reminded me to be patient enough to forget all the ugliness and focus on these good things.

I turned around to look back at our house in the middle of the compound. It wasn't the nicest in An Daral, just a one-story mud-brick house with five rooms, but Baba had painted the outside a pretty shade of blue. I loved my home.

"Zulaikha!" Malehkah stepped out onto the porch.

"Bale!" I hurried to the outer wall and unlocked the small single door, careful not to cut my hands on the sharp bits of metal that poked out like teeth from the welds on the lock. Then I stepped out into the street. Out into the public world.

The night's coolness lingered in the low ruts of the bumpy, uneven road. But warm beams of sunlight shone down between the peaks of the mountains and branches of the trees overhead. I wiped my brow. When the day started this warm, the thick heat would bake everything by midday, forcing the men down to the café, where they'd sit drinking orange Zam Zam soda, talking, and watching the red line climb the thermometer almost to the very top. I walked quickly down the side of the road, wrinkling my nose at the stink of the sewage streams that

trickled from the holes in the compound walls. But a little bad smell was better than walking out in the open, where someone might notice me.

Women passed me on the street, carrying naan in cloth bundles and chatting in low voices beneath their chadris. Malehkah had finally convinced Baba-jan that Zeynab was too old and too pretty to go outside the compound not covered up. When I had asked for a chadri too, Baba-jan just squeezed my shoulder, chuckled, and told me that I was too young. I was thirteen. I didn't feel young, not like my brother Khalid. And I saw the wrinkles in the corners of my father's eyes when he smiled at Zeynab in her new sky blue chadri. He looked very happy to see his daughter growing up. I wanted some of that smile for me too.

Just ahead was the door to the compound of one of the families in the Abdullah clan. I picked up my pace, crossing to the wall on the other side of the street and padding along as quietly as I could until I reached the river. At the best crossing place, the river was only ankle deep in summer, so I waded out and felt the cool water and the sand between my toes. Behind me, the road was empty and silent. I could relax for a moment.

At the bazaar on the east side of town, a few people already moved about their early business. A dented and rusted white pickup rattled along to deliver melons from Farah City. Big metal shutters rolled up to open stores, and shopkeepers brought their goods out for display in front of their stalls.

Everything was calm and quiet now, but that wouldn't last long. The day's first shoppers were already haggling over prices, the beginning of a blur of colors, smells, and sounds.

A donkey's loud bray echoed above all the noise. Soon, people would be in the street and on every corner, pausing only to trade in the day's gossip. Soon, there would be more people trying not to stare at my disfigured face. I pulled my chador over my mouth and hurried along to the naan shop.

"But what good will come of it? Answer me that." The owner of the bakery squatted, flopping a ball of dough onto the cement slab on the floor. He turned it, kneaded it, and flopped it again.

"It's freedom! We'll get to decide for ourselves who will rule us." A boy about Zeynab's age stoked the fire for the tandoor.

I shifted my weight and leaned against the counter at the window. If I were a man or even an