

Rosie and Moussa

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p 5-23

Rosie stands on the pavement and looks up.

Even if she tilts her head all the way back, she still can't see the roof of the block of flats. That's how high it is. It's so high that it makes Rosie's mouth open wide.

Then Rosie looks straight ahead again, at the glass door and the letterboxes in the hallway.

She hears the door of the taxi shutting. Her mum comes and stands beside her.

"Very nice," she says, biting her lip.

Mum always does that when she doesn't mean what she's saying.

Then she looks up, like Rosie just did, as high into the sky as she can.

Rosie wonders if her mum can see the roof.

"Well, here we are..."

Rosie doesn't say anything.

The taxi drives off down the street. Rosie and her mum didn't need a van to move house. It all happened really quickly, and they don't own that many things.

"So where are we going to live?" Rosie had asked.

"It's not far," her mum had said. "Just on the other side of town."

But the other side of town seems like the other side of the world now. *Even the weather here is different*, thinks Rosie. On the other side of town the sun was shining. But it's raining here. It's miserable weather, and it's a miserable day.

The town is so big that Rosie would get lost in it over and over again if she took herself for a walk. Some roads are straight and wide, with big buildings along them. Others are narrow and twist and turn their way from one place to another. Even the taxi driver took a wrong turn – and Rosie's dad once told her that taxi drivers know the town like the back of their hand.

"Shall we?" asks Rosie's Mum.

She holds out her hand to Rosie.

"Shall we what?" says Rosie sulkily.

"Go inside... silly," says Mum.

She looks at Rosie and gives her a big grin.

Then she nudges her.

"Into our new home."

If we really have to, thinks Rosie, as she takes Mum's hand. With her other hand, she picks up her little suitcase, which she'd put down on the pavement beside her. She sighs.

It's going to take ages to make new friends here, she thinks. But she doesn't say that to her mum. They walk hand in hand into the big block of flats.

"Hello," says Moussa. "I'm Moussa... Who are you?"

Two big eyes peer curiously at Rosie.

"You're new," he says before Rosie can reply.

"No, I'm not," says Rosie. "I'm Rosie."

"Okay..." says Moussa.

Moussa stands on tiptoe and looks over Rosie's shoulder and into the flat.

"I thought so," he says. "That's your room, isn't it?"

He points at Rosie's bedroom. The door's wide open.

"Yes. So?" Rosie asks.

"My room's right above yours. If I drilled a hole in my bedroom floor, I'd come out in your ceiling."

"Or you could just ring the doorbell," says Rosie.

Moussa nods and looks shyly at his toes.

"Yes, I could just ring the doorbell," he mumbles.

"I live here with my mum," Rosie says.

"What about your dad?" asks Moussa. "Where's he?"

"Is it okay if I tell you another day?"

"I know every inch of this building," says Moussa after a brief silence. "Have you been all the way up to the top?"

"No," says Rosie. "I've only just moved in."

"There's this door, and if you go through it, you come to a narrow staircase and that goes up to the roof."

"Oh, right," says Rosie.

"Don't mind my dog," says Moussa.

Rosie looks down at the cat that Moussa has got on a lead. It isn't a dog at all. Just an old ginger tom.

"He looks dangerous, but he doesn't bite."

"Are you pulling my leg?" asks Rosie. She's never seen anyone take a cat for a walk before like it's a dog.

"That's not a dog," she says.

Moussa sighs.

"I'd love to have a dog. But Mr Tak won't allow them in the building."

"Who's Mr Tak?"

"You haven't met Mr Tak yet? He yells all the time. *Less noise on the stairs, young man! Or: Hey, shut that door, young man! Were you born in a barn?!*"

"What a nasty man," says Rosie.

"Will you pretend my cat's a dog too?" Moussa asks Rosie.

"If you'll take me up to the roof."

"It's a deal," says Moussa, slapping Rosie's hand.

"What's your dog's name?" asks Rosie.

"Titus."

"That's a good name for a dog," says Rosie. Then she gives Titus a pat.

"Meow," sighs the dog.

Rosie has wrapped her scarf around her neck three times. That's how cold it is. It's almost impossible to recognise her.

Her breath feels warm under her scarf.

On the corner of the street, right across from the basketball court, is Mohammed's fish shop. There's a sign in the window that says "The Little Anchovy". It's really close to the flats. Rosie doesn't even need to cross the road to get there.

"You live nearby, do you?" Mohammed asks her.

Rosie nods. "I live with my mum in the big block of flats at the end of the street."

"Then we'll be seeing a lot of each other."

"I'm sure we will," says Rosie.

"And what can I do for you today?" Mohammed asks her.

Rosie buys a surprise for Mum. Then she walks back home carrying a big plastic bag.

"Where do you think you're going, young man?" Rosie hears someone shout just as she's about to walk upstairs.

It's Mr Tak. His voice booms down the hallway, cold and grey. Mr Tak really is very strict indeed. And he can't stand children. Rosie can hear his footsteps coming towards her. She wants to run away, but she can't move.

Rosie turns around and takes off her scarf.

"Rrrrosie," says Mr Tak, with an R that rattles like a bike on a bumpy road. "What we want is a decent building, with decent people..."

"Of course, Mr Tak."

Then she hears someone making a noise upstairs. It's Moussa. He's having an argument with his brothers.

"Not like those little terrors up there." He looks upstairs. "Hey, you lot! Keep the noise down!" His voice echoes around the building.

If he really wants it to be quiet, he shouldn't shout so much, thinks Rosie.

One of the brothers runs off giggling. Rosie wonders if it's Moussa.

"Do you know that one of them recently had the nerve to go up onto the roof? That's strrrictly forbidden."

Rosie nods.

"Let me take a look in that bag," says Mr Tak.

He grabs Rosie's bag and peers inside.

"Yuk!" he says, wrinkling his nose. "Go on, you – scam!"

Mum is sitting with a photo album on her lap. She's looking at old pictures of the three of them: Dad, Mum and Rosie. Rosie on Dad's shoulders, on a day at the seaside. Rosie on a car roof, with Dad standing by the door with a grin on his face. He's wearing a gold chain around his neck.

When Rosie comes in, Mum closes the book and bites back her tears.

Rosie heads into the kitchen, where she arranges the oysters on a plate and pours two glasses of lemonade. She slices a lemon in half, picks up the peppermill and carries everything into the living room.

"Surprise!"

"Oysters and lemonade," Mum laughs.

"Just like with Dad..." says Rosie.

She raises her glass. That's what you do when you want to wish someone well.

Mum raises her glass too. "Here's to us."

And to Dad... thinks Rosie.

Then Mum tears the last page from the calendar. The new calendar is ready and waiting. All 365 pages of it. Night falls over the town, cold as ice. In the distance, Rosie can hear the music from someone else's party.

Moussa is grinning all over his face when he comes and knocks on Rosie's door a few days later. He looks as though he's about to burst with pride.

"Shall we...?" he whispers mysteriously.

Rosie carefully lets the door close behind her. Mum mustn't find out what they're up to.

"You know you can't tell anyone about this," says Moussa. He has never looked at Rosie so seriously before.

"Of course not," says Rosie.

Mr Tak has strrrictly forbidden it, and Mum probably wouldn't want them to go all the way up to the roof either. But if you never did anything that your mum told you not to do, life would be very dull indeed.

"And what will happen if I do tell someone?" asks Rosie.

"Well, then... green hair will grow out of your ears," says Moussa. It's the first thing he can think of.

"It's more than a hundred steps to the top," says Moussa.

He counted the steps last time he went up to the roof. He went with his big brother that time. But just as he'd almost got to one hundred he thought about something else and he lost count.

They walk past the flats of Bert the teacher and the Diallo family... higher and higher. Everything is just as Moussa said it would be. After the ninth floor, they reach a narrow staircase. There's a sign in red letters. NO TRESPASSING, it says.

Rosie's not so sure about it now. She looks at the red letters again.

"You can see the whole town from up there. The football stadium and the railway station. You can see the trains coming into town and going back out again. One time I watched a train go all the way to the sea."

Rosie doesn't believe him. But she doesn't get a chance to say so.

"I should have known," says Moussa.

"What should you have known?"

"That you're a bwawk-bwawk chicken."

"A what??"

"A bwawk-bwawk chicken," Moussa repeats with a mean look on his face.

"No, I am not!" Rosie snaps back at him.

Moussa grins. For a moment, Rosie thinks about thumping him in the belly. So hard that he won't be able to say anything else for a little while. But she doesn't do it. Before Moussa can say anything else, she runs ahead of him, up the narrow staircase. To the iron door.

Rosie pushes the door. As hard as she can.

"Wait," Moussa calls. He races up the stairs after Rosie.

Squeaking and grinding, the door opens wide...