

In transit

by Siren of Brixton

Clare sits bolt upright in the hard plastic chair, warily tracking every passer-by. In her lap, Kim's hair is damp with sweat, dark blonde curls melting against her flushed cheeks. Clare absently strokes the length, soothing both of them.

Kim's weight has put Clare's leg to sleep and her back is aching from sitting still too long, but she doesn't move. Anything rather than wake her. Every now and then she runs her free hand over the pile of bags beside her, reassuring herself they're still there.

In the opposite bank of chairs an old Arab man is stretched out asleep. His wife, head-to-toe in black, holds out a container of sticky looking pastries. Their strangeness is a threat she can't name, so Clare shakes her head and looks away. She looks up at the big sign overhead and wills it to change.

The last airport was humming with people but this one is bare. The air feels hollow, like tin. Clare only has the vaguest idea where in the world they are, but it's clearly the middle of the night. Only a few shops are open, selling strange-smelling sweets and magazines Clare can't read. Even the staff move slowly, as if they are sleep-working. The thought makes her smile.

The departure sign clatters its changes. Clare watches in anticipation and feels a weight lift as the code she's learned by heart appears at last. She wriggles with excitement despite herself, and Kim stirs. Clare freezes: holds her breath until the child settles again, lets it out oh-so-slowly. Forty-five minutes. Forty-five minutes, then six hours, then it's done.

At the police station a lady gave Kim a plastic aquarium to play with. It was filled with water and had tiny plastic fish inside. When you pushed a button on the bottom, bubbles came up and made the fish move. Clare supposed they were meant to be swimming, but really they just rolled around and around, like when Goldie the goldfish wouldn't flush.

Finally the sign shuffles up 'Boarding'. Clare slides the airport map from under Kim's sleeping body and carefully traces the route to the gate, back the way they came. Then she leans over the hot little face, smells her soft baby scent, and whispers her awake.

"Kim. Kimmy. Time to wake up"

"Mummy?"

Kim sits up, more asleep than awake. She looks so little and lost in her rumpled clothes that Clare thinks her heart will break. The angry love that's been her constant companion these last days surges, taking away her breath. I'll protect you! I will! Fierce tears well, so she busies herself with the bags.

"Look: here's Blankey. Will you hold Blankey for me?" Maybe words will hold back the fear. "And here's your backpack. Give me one arm. And the other." The same words her mother used with her.

Kimmy's compliant but she's awake now and taking in the surroundings. Clare hurries. No more questions, not yet, she thinks. I don't know what to say, even when I know the answers. Will I see my friends again? Where are my toys? What about my school?

Clare takes Kimmy's hand and leads her towards the gate. She's determined not to let Kim down. Through everything, those big blue eyes have looked up to her and never once waivered. At the aunties', Clare would lie awake at night and listen to the voices seeping in from the living room. Arguments. Angry words that sucked the strength from Clare's bones. All they have now is each other, that much seems clear, and Kimmy needs her.

"How many more planes?"

"No more after this." Kim's satisfied nod makes Clare smile. She's been so good. That ferocious love surges again.

"Will they have cake?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"And then we see Daddy?"

"And then we see Daddy."

Clare would love to get inside that little head, understand what she knows, what she doesn't know. What does Daddy mean to her?

They reach the gate, and Clare joins the queue. Kim's hand feels clammy in hers, but she holds on, tight.

“But not Mummy.”

Clare is saved from answering by the appearance of an air hostess, all smiles.

“You must be my unaccompanied minors! My name's Joanna, you can call me Jo.”

Kim slides behind Clare, gripping tight to her hand, burying her head into her sister's back.

“I'm Clare, and this is Kim. It's okay, Kimmy.”

Joanna drops to their level.

“Let's get you out of this queue, shall we?” she whispers. She picks up their bags, and takes Clare's free hand, and leads them towards the plane. Clare surrenders to the adult presence. Six more hours.

Then what?

