

The Colour of Home

Mary Hoffman

'We have a new boy joining us at school today,' said Miss Kelly. 'He's called Hassan and he's from Somalia. I want you to make him feel at home.'

But the classroom didn't feel like home to Hassan at all. In his real home he had lessons out of doors from early in the morning until the sun got too hot at midday. Here he had to stay indoors except in the middle of the day, when he shivered outside in the damp playground. The children were friendly. They smiled at Hassan and one of the boys kicked a football towards him. But he didn't understand anything that anyone said – only his name and 'hello' and 'toilet'. It was tiring remembering even a few English words.

After lunch, which Hassan didn't eat, because he didn't know what it was, Miss Kelly gave all the children big sheets of gritty grey paper and pinned them to easels. She gave Hassan paintbrushes and a pot of water and showed him where all the colours were. He understood from her smiles and movements that she wanted him to paint a picture, but he had never done such a thing before.

He watched the other children for a while, then chose a bottle of bright blue. He painted a blue, blue sky, without any clouds. Then a white house, a yellow sun and a mimosa tree. Outside the house he made stick figures – himself, his father, his mother holding a bundle that was his baby sister, his grandparents, his uncle, his two cousins. There were nine people outside the house, who all lived inside it.

Then Hassan took more paint and put in the animals – a flock of white sheep, some brown goats and a small sandy creature who was supposed to be his cat.

'What a lovely picture, Hassan,' said Miss Kelly. 'What beautiful bright colours!'

But Hassan hadn't finished. Now he chose red and orange and painted big flames on the roof of the house. The blue sky changed to a murky purple. He drew another figure with a gun, and made black bullets come out of it. He took the red paint again and splattered it on the white walls of the house.

Name:**Date:****Read the text, and then answer the questions.**

1. Choose three things from the first three paragraphs which show you that Hassan is in a strange and unfamiliar environment.

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2. In what ways do you think Miss Kelly showed concern for Hassan? Give examples from the text to support your answer.

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3. How does Hassan's school day now differ from Somalia? How do you know?

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4. Why do you think Hassan watched the other children before he began painting?

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5. Why does the author repeat the word 'blue' when describing Hassan's sky?

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6. How does the atmosphere of Hassan's painting change in the last paragraph? Give examples from the text.

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7. Compare how Hassan's life in Somalia is first described, to the description at the end of the text. How does the description change?

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8. What does Hassan's finished painting tell you about what might have happened to him?

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