



How Many Miles to Babylon?

Paula Fox

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Ten-year-old James leaves school one day and goes down to the basement of an abandoned house, as he has done many times before. It is here that he enacts the fantasy that his mother has woven for him: he is an African prince in hiding, guarded by his three great-aunts while his mother is in Africa fixing everything, telling people about him and the other African princes so that they can come together in their robes and feathers and lead the lives of princes again. In reality, James lives in a one-room apartment with his father's three aunts. His mother is sick and has been in the hospital for a while; his father, who walked out on them, has been gone even longer.

But on this trip to the abandoned house, James has bad luck: he is discovered there by Gino, Stick, and Blue, tough boys not much older than James who have a dog-stealing racket: they steal dogs and collect reward money for "finding" them. The boys force James to go with them and do what they tell him to do, and they keep him away from home overnight. "They made me ride for miles," he tells his aunts when he is finally home. "I went to Coney. I saw the Atlantic Ocean..."

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