# Chapter 9 First Class

Those of you who are observant will have noticed that new wastepaper baskets have been placed at various locations around the playground. Personally, I have always felt that the number of bins that we had previously was adequate, but judging by the amount of litter we are finding in the playground, it seems that many of you are unable to use one unless it is right under your nose. I do hope that you will make use of these waste-placement vessels from now on. They do cost money, they do have a purpose, and they do help to make the school a much better place to be in.'

Alem sat right at the back of the assembly hall listening to the headmaster speaking. He had never seen anything like this. Teachers looked on from various points around the hall as the headmaster delivered his address to the fidgety pupils from the raised stage. Alem was mesmerised.

'Unfortunately, two boys were permanently excluded last week for bringing knives on to the school premises. We exclude pupils only very reluctantly from this school, but there are simply no two ways about it, we will not tolerate the presence of any weapons on these premises. We, all of us here, sent a message of condolence to St Luke's when Mr Gatsby was stabbed to death in his own classroom. And then, in this very hall, we spoke about what could have possibly led up to such a killing taking place in an educational institution. And all of us agreed—and if I remember well, there were no dissenting voices—that we would try our very best to make sure that we never reached that point. Well, this was the second time those boys had been caught with knives. They simply could not be allowed to get away with it a second time, so I was left with no alternative but to exclude them. Let this be a lesson to you all, but more important, let the death of Mr Gatsby be a lesson to us all. Remember our school motto, live to learn, learn to live, and let us be true to our word.'

Alem was still fully focused on the headmaster. He took in every single word as if his life depended on it. He was shocked by what he was hearing and wondered if the headmaster might be exaggerating. This was the first talk of anything like war that he had heard since arriving in Britain and here he was, hearing it on his first day at school.

'Now I want to give you some good news,' the headmaster continued. 'Those of you that read the Newham Recorder would have seen two of our pupils on its front page this week. Both Teresa Grant and Inderjit Singh made the front page of our local paper because of the amount of time they have devoted to helping the older members of our community. This is an example of the kind of news that Great Milford School should be known for; these are the kind of pupils that we can all be proud of. I would like them both to come up on the stage to receive one of our very own Positive Pupil's Certificates.'

The two pupils walked to the stage to receive their certificates as the teachers and the other pupils clapped. Alem clapped and quietly whispered to himself, 'Positive pupil.' He liked the sound of it.

'Now, off to your classes, and let's be wiser come the end of the day,' said the headmaster as the two pupils left the stage. Immediately, the hall erupted with sound as everyone stood up and began to chatter.

'Quietly!' shouted the headmaster at the top of his voice.

'Hello, Alem!' The voice came from a teacher approaching him. She was wearing a sari and it looked to Alem as if she was gliding towards him. 'My name is Mrs Kumar, I'm head of your form and I need to give you this.' She handed him a timetable. 'If you spend a few minutes on it, you'll see how it works. Pretty straightforward really, subject, classroom, time, it's easy, and if you have any problems finding the classrooms, just ask another pupil. Your first lesson is English. I'm going that way, follow me.'

Two corridors later, Mrs Kumar opened the classroom door for Alem. 'There you go,' she said and walked away.

Alem nervously walked into the room. There was no teacher. Pupils were sitting or standing around their desks talking loudly and joking. Alem didn't know what to do with himself. He stood just inside the room waiting for something to happen, hoping that the teacher would come and instruct him on protocol, or at least tell him where to sit. Some of the pupils glanced at Alem but carried on telling their stories and trying to make each other laugh. Alem felt insignificant.

Suddenly a pupil ran into the classroom, swinging open the door with great force. It hit Alem in the back and knocked him to the floor. The whole class began laughing. Alem lay completely still. He was physically unhurt but wished he could disappear through the crack in the floorboard that he was now looking down at. He wanted to fade away and reappear back home with the Fitzgeralds.

'To your seats—now!' The powerful shout came from a teacher standing beside Alem. The voice filled the room; the pupils fell silent, leaving the teacher's shout to reverberate around the room for a few seconds.

Alem looked up; the teacher towered above him

like a giant. He leaned down and stretched out a helping hand.

'And what are you doing down there?'

'Getting up,' shouted an unidentifiable pupil.

'That's enough of that.' The teacher helped Alem to his feet. 'What happened here?' he continued.

'I don't know.' Alem's words were barely audible.

'You don't know; why don't you know?'

Alem had nothing new to say. 'I don't know.'

'It was my fault, sir,' a voice interrupted.

'You again, Fern?'

'Sir, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was running to get to the lesson, and when I opened the door, the door hit him and he fell to the floor. It was an accident, sir, I didn't mean it—honest, sir.'

'Is this true?' the teacher said, looking towards Alem.

'I don't know,' Alem said completely sincerely.

All the pupils burst into laughter once more.

'Quiet!' the teacher shouted loudly. He put his hands on his hips and growled at Alem in a feeble attempt to look hard. 'Do you know any other words?'

'I don't know.' Alem hesitated. There were sniggers as the pupils tried hard to hold back and not laugh out loud.

Alem was confused. 'No—I mean yes—I mean I do, yes, I do know some more words.'

'Good,' said the teacher, sensing a conclusion, 'Is his version of events true?'

'Yes,' Alem said loud and clear.

'OK, that's all I wanted to know. Now, both of you, to your seats—and Fern, don't run in the building, and watch where you're going or you'll end up on the floor and you'll be lost for words.'

The boy walked away. Alem looked at the teacher, not knowing what to do with himself. 'Please, teacher, where do I sit?'

'On a chair,' shouted another voice.

There was more laughter from the class.

'Quiet, please,' said the teacher. 'Wherever you can find a seat,' he said, looking around the classroom.

From the back of the room the boy who had just knocked Alem down spoke. 'He could sit next to me, sir,' he said, pointing to the empty seat next to him.

'Would you like to sit there?' the teacher asked, unsure whether Alem would want to sit next to the boy who had just floored him.

'Yes,' Alem replied, tactfully adding 'sir' in imitation of the other boy addressing the teacher.

Alem was pleased to be going to the back of the class. After his big entrance, all he wanted to do now was sink into the background. But that was not to happen; he was to be the centre of attention for a little longer.

'You must be the new boy,' the teacher said to Alem. Now the whole class turned to look at Alem again.

'Yes, sir.'

'And your name?'

'Alem Kelo.'

'Well, my name is Mr Walsh and I'm sure you'll get to know the rest of the class soon enough. Have you ever read Charles Dickens, Alem?'

'No, but I have heard of him,' said Alem enthusiastically.

'Very good,' said the teacher. 'We have all read Great Expectations, and today I would like us to discuss some of the issues raised in the novel. So for now you can just listen, but if you would like to make a contribution to the debate, feel free to do so.'

The pupils turned to face the teacher and the lesson started. Although Alem had not read Great Expectations, there were plenty of times when he wanted to join in the debate but he just didn't want to attract any kind of attention to himself.

Outside the classroom after the lesson the boy who had knocked Alem down went straight to him.

'Sorry about that, mate, I really didn't mean it. I thought I was late for the lesson so there's me running through the school like a nutter and there you was behind the door. Sorry.'

'It is OK, I was not hurt,' Alem replied smiling.

'So yu new then?'

'Yes, my first day and now I shall never forget my first entrance into an English classroom.'

'I said I'm sorry,' the boy replied swiftly.

'No, it's OK, maybe in the future I will think it was quite funny—it's possible.'

'My name's Robert. Have you got science now?'

Alem pulled out the timetable from his bag and looked at it. 'Yes.'

'Me too,' Robert replied, walking away quickly. 'Let's go.'

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There were no major problems throughout the rest of the day. Alem's approach to the lessons was pretty much the same: take it easy, look, listen and pick up what you can. The teachers were aware that Alem was starting in the middle of the school term and most soon realised that he was new to the country.

At dinnertime Robert found Alem wandering in the playground and invited him out to the fish and chip shop. They joined the queue and after a wait of about fifteen minutes, they managed to get themselves a bag of chips each. Alem had developed a habit of reading every notice in sight and was amused by the notice on the outside door of the shop. It said: 'Only 3 schoolchildren at any one time.'

After eating their chips they went on to the newsagent's to buy some chocolates and there he saw a similar sign: 'No more than 3 schoolchildren allowed.'

Alem had read about the English tradition of queuing, but after spending most of his dinnertime waiting in line, he couldn't understand why these shopkeepers were so keen on preserving this tradition and making them queue outside their shops for as long as possible.

Alem and Robert were sitting on a wall finishing their chocolates when Robert looked at his watch. 'Only ten minutes left, guy,' he shouted, alluding to some type of emergency. He reached for the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. 'Want a fag?'

Alem was horrified. 'Do you smoke?' he said, shaking his head vigorously.

'Yeah, so do you want one or what?'

'No,' Alem replied calmly, 'I'm much too young to smoke and look how close you are to school.'

'Loads of kids smoke, look.'

Alem looked around and noticed that many of the pupils were smoking, some even while heading back towards the school.

'Is this allowed?' he said, surprised.

'They can't stop us,' Robert said smugly. 'What can they do? So long as you put it out before you enter the school gates, you're OK. You see that girl there?' he said, pointing his cigarette in the direction of a girl walking towards them. 'Look, she's smoking, she smokes like a factory, and her dad's a teacher, so don't fret, guy, yu safe, trust me.' He held the cigarette packet out, inviting Alem to partake.

'No, it's OK,' Alem said, pulling out his timetable to indicate his lack of interest.

At the end of the day the smokers were more obvious. Alem found that as soon as they left the school grounds, many pupils lit cigarettes and few made any attempt to hide them. One boy even waved to a teacher who was leaving the school in his car.

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Alem made his way home alone. There was a spring in his step. All things considered, he thought it had been an interesting, if not perfect, first day in school. When he got to the road where he lived, he ran the rest of the way. He rang the bell and knocked on the door. Mrs Fitzgerald opened the door and Alem bounced in, a little out of breath but excited.

'Mrs Fitzgerald, school was so good! So many different students, so many different lessons, and every lesson was in a different classroom.'

'So you liked it then?' Mrs Fitzgerald gave him a warm, motherly smile.

'Yes. I made a few mistakes and I got pushed over flat on the ground, but that was an accident. It's good, I liked it.'

'And you want to go back?' she asked, heading for the kitchen with Alem trailing behind her.

'Of course I do!'

'Very good. Now, Alem, I want you to go up to

your room, put your things away and change your clothes. The lady from the refugee place rang earlier, she wants to see you. She said she'd be here soon. Hurry up now.'

Alem looked puzzled. 'What does she want to see me for?'

'I don't honestly know, but don't worry. I asked her the very same question and she told me not to worry. She said it looked like good news.'

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An hour later Mariam arrived at the house. Mr Fitzgerald joined them in the living room, knowing that something was going to happen.

Mariam looked Alem up and down as if he was a relative she hadn't seen for years. 'You look very well, Alem. How was school?'

'All right, thank you.'

'Did you make any friends?'

'I spoke to many people and made one friend.'

'That's not bad,' Mariam said.

'Please, please sit down,' Mr Fitzgerald interjected. They all found themselves seats.

Mariam continued with her small talk. 'When I first went to school it took me a whole week before I made any friends. It was terrible; things got better but it took time.'

'Cup of tea?' Mrs Fitzgerald asked and everyone except Alem nodded their heads eagerly.

Once the tea was on the table, Mariam revealed her reason for coming. When she spoke, she addressed Alem as if no one else was in the room.

'Well, Alem, as you know, your application for political asylum has been submitted and we are still waiting for a response from the Home Office. We know that you said you didn't have any relatives in Britain but we still made some investigations just in case there were some that you didn't know about, and we have had no luck there.'

Alem couldn't understand why she should doubt him. 'I told you that I have no relatives here. What's the matter? Don't you believe me?'

'I believe you,' Mariam replied, trying to reassure him, 'but it's not just about me; besides, we've had cases in the past where some asylum seekers genuinely were not aware they had relatives here.'

'If I had relatives here, I would find them myself,' Alem said slowly and firmly. Mariam knew he meant it.

She put her file on her lap and began scrabbling through it, speaking as she did so. 'This arrived yesterday at our head office in London.' She pulled out a blue airmail letter; she leaned forward to hand it over to Alem. 'It's addressed to you, we have not opened it.'

Alem took one look at it and immediately sprang off his seat. 'It's from my father, I can see! It's from my father, I know it! I know his writing! Oh, Mariam, I am so happy! Mrs Fitzgerald, it's my father!'

For a few moments Alem walked in circles around his chair, looking at the letter as if it was a winning lottery ticket which was just about to change his life. The letter was a breakthrough. Everyone else looked at each other and smiled, pleased that Alem was pleased.

Alem sat down and began to open the letter. It was an awkward letter to open. It was one of those extra-light airmail letters that fold in such a way that the letter itself becomes the envelope.

'I've a letter opener,' Mr Fitzgerald said, turning to leave the room.

'Actually,' Mariam interrupted swiftly, 'I think it may be best if you read the letter alone, Alem.'

Alem stopped. The room went silent as he looked around for a reaction.

'Go to your room if you like, it's probably best if you read it in your own space,' Mrs Fitzgerald said.

Alem headed upstairs and Mrs Fitzgerald began to pour Mariam more tea. 'How would his father know how to contact him?' she enquired.

'The Refugee Council is well known around the world, and many people know that if someone is in Britain and they are in the process of seeking refugee status, we can usually track them down.'

'Tell me something,' Mr Fitzgerald said, eager to learn, 'are there British refugees in other countries?'

'Oh, yes,' Mariam replied. 'You would be surprised how many British refugees there are in places like Brazil and Mexico. They're usually whistle blowers but there are very old political refugees from the time of World War II still living in Russia and Cuba.'

For the next fifteen minutes they drank more tea and talked about Cuba. Then it occurred to Mariam that they had heard nothing from Alem, so she expressed her concern to Mrs Fitzgerald, who went up to his room and stood outside the door.

'Alem?' she said, but there was no reply. 'Alem, are you all right?'

There was still no reply. She knocked on the door and raised her voice. 'Alem, is anything the matter?'

Mariam heard the calls and went and stood at the bottom of the stairs. 'Is everything all right, Mrs Fitzgerald?'

'I don't know,' she replied, 'Alem's not answering me. Alem,' she continued, 'Alem, can I come in?'

At last Alem replied. His voice was quiet, conveying no obvious emotion. 'No, please don't come in. I'm OK—I shall come down soon. Please leave me alone for a while, I will be down soon.'

'As you say,' said Mrs Fitzgerald, and she made her way downstairs.

Back in the living room Mrs Fitzgerald told Mariam what Alem had said and then offered her another cup of tea.

Nobody knew what to think or do. The tea ritual was now useful because it meant that something was happening in the room. Then as they drank, they heard Alem making his way slowly down the stairs. He entered the room expressionless. He sat back in the seat where he sat previously and threw the letter on the coffee table in the centre of the room. It slid across the table and ended up tucked under the saucer of Mariam's cup.

'Read it, Mariam, and then tell me what I should do,' Alem said.

Mariam picked up the letter, unfolded it and read it silently to herself. The only sound that could be heard was the sound of rush-hour traffic and barking dogs in the distance.

My dearest son,

I do hope this letter finds you soon and that you are as well as can be. War is such a terrible thing, my son, I hope you never witness it again. Darkness is upon our land; it seems that every man that is alive is limping and that there are bloodstains on the dresses of all our women. Today I found the arm of a man lying at the side of a street. No body, just one arm. And I found myself asking trivial questions like, 'Is this an Ethiopian or an Eritrean arm?' Could you believe it? I was asking this question, I, the great Pan-Africanist. War is eating away at our souls, young man, it is terrible.

Sadly I must tell you that I have bad news. From the day I returned here I have been searching but I cannot find your mother. She left your auntie's house in Asmara to go visit your grandmother in Badme. Some people tell me she has been seen in Ethiopia, some say she is in Eritrea, but I have tried everywhere I can think of and I can't find her. When I came back I found that your auntie's house had been looted and burnt but your auntie got out in time. She is with your grandmother now. It has been very hard for me. I have hardly slept since I came back here. I did not want to give you such news but what can I do? You must know the truth, son. I can't find your mother. I ask myself what kind of a place do I live in if I can't find your mother, my wife and our love? But I can casually find the arm of someone I don't know just lying in the streets.

The organisation of EAST has fallen apart and now there is not a single organisation working for peace in the region. It seems that our people are so busy dealing with war that there is no time to deal in peace. Our Eritrean office has been raided and our Ethiopian office has been raided too. It is so sad that our only surviving branch is in London.

I hope you understand why we had to leave you in England for a while. I have so much work to do, and I will not stop until I find your mother. Be strong, young man. Learn more English and remember to love your neighbour. I will write you another letter soon.

Your loving father

Mariam carefully folded the letter. 'Your father said be strong and that's exactly what you must be,' she said, placing the letter on the table.

The front door opened. It was Ruth returning from work. 'Hello, I'm home,' she shouted, running upstairs to play some CDs.

Mr and Mrs Fitzgerald sat awkwardly looking at each other, trying not to catch the eyes of Mariam or Alem. As always, the first to speak up was Mrs Fitzgerald.

'So what is it? Can we help?'

'Alem will explain when he is ready,' Mariam said.

'I am ready,' Alem said. 'You can read the letter,' he said, looking at Mrs Fitzgerald.

Mrs Fitzgerald began to feel it was unwise to push for too much information. She decided to back off. 'It's all right, tell us about it later.'

But Alem could see no reason why it had to be left until later. He leaned forward, picked up the letter and handed it to Mrs Fitzgerald. As he leaned back, he announced, 'My mother is gone.'

The Fitzgeralds simultaneously broke out into speech.

'What do you mean she's gone? There must be some mistake,' said Mrs Fitzgerald.

'Gone where?' asked Mr Fitzgerald.

Alem fixed his gaze on the coffee table. 'Nobody knows. She might be kidnapped, or soldiers could have made her into a slave.'

'Oh, god, oh, my god! That's a terrible thought,' said Mr Fitzgerald, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

Mariam raised her voice, making sure everyone else heard her. 'No, Alem, that is not what the letter says, and you must not assume such things.'

'So where is my mother?' Alem asked, looking straight into Mariam's eyes. 'These are the kinds of things that soldiers do.'

'We don't know what's happened,' Mariam replied, raising her shoulders and stretching the upturned palms of her hands towards Alem as if to invite suggestions. 'But because your father has had problems finding her, you don't have to assume the worst. He may have found her even before this letter arrived. He will write again soon and, who knows, your next letter may be written by her, we just don't know.'

Alem stood up. 'I must go to my room.'

'Don't worry, Alem,' Mariam said, trying to reassure him.

Alem's mood remained unchanged. He still showed little emotion. Nobody had seen him as cold as this before. Once more he looked directly into the eyes of Mariam as he spoke.

'You are an African, Mariam, you know Eritrea, you know Ethiopia, and you also know that where we come from, when a woman disappears, anything is possible. They are burning down houses, they are bombing schools, there are pieces of people's bodies lying in the streets; this is war, and war is bad wherever it is. But the war that is happening in Eritrea and Ethiopia is so cruel. It is like a family at war, it is neighbour killing neighbour. We are killing ourselves as if we never want to see ourselves again, and when you hate yourself this much, anything is possible.'

The Fitzgeralds saw Mariam shudder from the truth and drop her head in silence.

Mrs Fitzgerald stood up, put the letter on the table, rubbed her hands together and said, 'I think I'll go and make some fresh tea.'