Opening extract from

Refugee Boy

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CHAPTER 1

~ Welcome to the Weather ~

'Welcome to England, Mr Kelo,' said the immigration officer as he handed back the passports to Alem's father.

Alem stared up at the tall officer; the officer looked down at Alem. 'Have a good holiday now.'

'Thank you,' said Alem's father. He took Alem's hand and began to head for the baggage-reclaim area.

Alem jerked his father's hand and stopped suddenly. 'Abbaye, yaw teguru tekatlowal,' he said, brimming with excitement.

His father turned to him and spoke as if he was trying to shout quietly. 'What did I tell you? From now on you must try to speak English, you must practise your English – all right, young man?'

Alem panicked. 'Ishi abbaye,' he said.

His father's response was swift. 'English, I said.'

'Yes, Father.'

'Now what did you say?'

Alem looked back towards passport control. 'Father, that man who looked at the passports, what was wrong with him?'

'Could you tell me why you only have two pieces of luggage? It does seem odd,' said the customs officer as he looked around their feet for other pieces.

'Well, we only have one each because we are only going to be staying for a short time and we were planning to buy many things here in London, in the famous Oxford Road and Piccadilly Circle,' Alem's father replied, trying to put on the best upper-class accent that he could, but sounding rather clumsy.

'I think you mean Oxford Street and Piccadilly Circus. Could I see your passports, please?'

The man spent a good two minutes checking the passports before he put them down on the table next to the suitcases. Alem could sense that the words the customs officer was speaking were well rehearsed, he could sense that he was trying to be well-mannered and inoffensive, but at the same time there was something dangerous about him. It was as if he were an animal of prey waiting for a chance to pounce.

'So you are having a short holiday, sir? I would have thought that after coming all this way you would want to stay with us a little bit longer. Do you mind if I have a look in the cases, sir?'

'No, not at all. You should do what you have to do.'

The officer spent the next five minutes searching through the luggage. Alem wanted to tell him to be careful when he started to search his case but he was very self-conscious of the fact that his English wasn't

great. In fact, Alem's English was quite good but he had never spoken English to an English person before. So he just watched in silence as the officer looked inside his schoolbooks and his toiletry bag, he even checked his underpants and looked in his socks. The officer then made an attempt to pack everything back as he had found it but it wasn't happening. Alem's father ended up helping him to push everything into the cases as best they could before the officer gave them permission to continue.

'That will be all, sir. I'm sorry for keeping you and I thank you for your co-operation.'

By now Alem's father was so annoyed that he didn't respond, he just picked up the suitcases and the passports and they continued towards the exit.

After changing some traveller's cheques, they headed outside for a taxi. It was a damp and chilly October day, and the sky over Heathrow was grey.

'It will rain, Father,' said Alem as he pointed to the sky.

His father smiled. 'You haven't been here for one hour yet but you have become English already; the English always talk about the weather. No, young man, that is not rain clouds, that is just English clouds. You will get used to them, they come with the territory.'

They approached a waiting taxi and Alem's father

handed a card to the driver. 'Is that where you wanna go, mate?' he asked, holding the card away from himself to compensate for his long-sightedness.

Alem's father nodded. 'Yes, please.'

'The Palace Hotel, High Street, Datchet, Berkshire. That's just up the road. I don't go there often – good job too, I'd never earn a living. OK, hop in.'

They did and they were on their way.

Alem's father came from the Amhara tribe of Ethiopia. His large forehead, light-brown skin and large eyes were typical of his people, as was his short, jet-black, curly hair. It is said that the Amhara people have Arab as well as African blood flowing through their veins, and the facial features of Alem and his father did reinforce that theory. He was a man who tried to smile as much as he could to please others but he took the business of life very seriously. In the taxi he sat straight-backed throughout the journey and looked silently straight ahead while Alem's eyes explored the black taxi's interior. Even the back of the taxi was a source of wonder for Alem, but his excitement was contained as he could see that his father wasn't in the mood. He looked deep in thought. To keep his mind occupied Alem tried to practise his English by reading the notices in the cab, whispering the words as he read them: 'No smok-ing. Li-censed

Hack-ney Car-riage. Red light in-di-cates doors are locked. This seat-belt is for your per-son-al safe-ty.'

After a while his attention turned to the road outside, the M4. It was so straight and wide; the ride was so smooth, no potholes, no wild bends, just the sound of the engine and the tyres on the road.

They had travelled for only about seven miles when they turned off the motorway and headed towards the village down Majors Farm Road. It suddenly went quiet; there were very few cars on the road and no farms to be seen, just a few empty fields. As they neared the village, Alem looked towards all the semi-detached houses for any sign of life. He could see the houses but where were the people? All the houses had cars in their driveways, usually two, and many had cats in the windows, but no people. He looked up at the chimneys and wondered what they were there for.

When they entered the village, things became a little busier but still remained very orderly. And now Alem began to see animals; they were only dogs that people had on leads but he was sure that he would soon see the local goats and chickens.

The taxi pulled up outside the hotel. It was an old-fashioned building that looked to Alem more like a big house than a hotel, after all, he had seen the Holiday Inn in Addis Ababa and he thought that was a big skyscraper, so he expected English hotels

to be even bigger.

'Here you are, guvs,' said the driver, 'the Palace Hotel, wot a lavely little 'ous.'

Alem and his father couldn't understand what he said, but they knew that they had arrived.

'I beg your pardon?' By now Alem's father had dropped his pseudo-posh accent.

The taxi driver pointed to the house and spoke louder and slower. 'That is a love-er-ly little house, I said.'

'Oh, yes,' replied Alem's father as he raised the corners of his lips a tiny little bit in order to represent a smile. 'It is a nice building. How much money shall I pay you?'

'Eighteen quid and fifty pee, boss.'

It was a family-run three-star hotel with a pub and restaurant. The walls of the reception area were covered with paintings of idyllic English countryside scenes that led all the way up the oak stairs. Alem and his father stood at the desk for a few minutes waiting for someone to come. After checking out all the paintings and reading all the notices, Alem's father rang the miniature brass bell that was on the reception counter. Immediately a man appeared from the room behind the counter, a very big, bearded man who Alem thought looked very much like the customs officer they had not long left, except this man had a

smile and no uniform.

'What can I do for you, sir?' he said, towering above both of them.

'We have a twin room reserved for us. My name is Mr Kelo, I spoke to you on the phone last week.'

The big man flicked through the pages of the registration book on the desk until he found the right page. 'Oh yes, that's right, Mr Kelo, a twin room for four nights for you and your son,' he said. Alem struggled to understand his accent. 'Did you have a pleasant flight?'

'Yes; it was a little crowded and we didn't get much sleep, but it was quite pleasant.'

'Well, we have given you a room in a very quiet part of the hotel where you can sleep for as long as you like. Even the trains are quiet here. Follow me, I'll take you there.'

As they walked upstairs to the room, the man kept talking. 'Only four nights with us?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Alem's father, following behind him.

'You'll need more than four days.'

'Four days is all we have,' Alem's father said abruptly.

The big man stopped suddenly, forcing Alem and his father to stop suddenly behind him. 'I'm just trying to be friendly, sir.'

Alem's father looked hesitantly towards Alem, then

towards the big man. 'I'm sorry, sir, I'm a bit tired, I think I need some sleep. My apologies. Actually we weren't sure how long we were going to be staying in the area. I have been told that there are many interesting places to see in England so we may move around a little.'

'Oh yes, there certainly is much to see,' said the man, continuing up the stairs. 'It's not just England, you know – if you get the chance you should visit Scotland. I've lived down here for most of my life but I was born in bonnie Scotland. When I want a holiday, where do I go? Scotland, of course. I've never forgotten my roots.'

The room was medium-sized and spotless. As the big man was telling his father about checkout and breakfast times, Alem headed straight for the window to see what kind of view they had. Sadly it was just the hotel car park and the backs of some other buildings, and if he put his head right up to the window and moved his eyeballs as far right as they could go, he could just about see a train station.

They spent the evening in the hotel room. Alem's father was much quieter than usual and spent most of his time reading a London guidebook while Alem watched television. It was Saturday night and most of the television channels were transmitting game shows or dating shows. Alem thought it was all very bizarre.

He was trying his best to understand what was being said but most of the time he just couldn't keep up with the pace of people's speech. From the moment that he landed he noticed that the English that he was hearing was very different from the English he had been taught at school. The customs officer had sounded different from the taxi driver and on the television everyone seemed to have his or her own accent. When Alem couldn't take it any longer, he switched off the television and went to look out of the window again. Nothing had changed, except it was now dark. He turned to his father. 'Nege, mindinnow yemminniseraw?'

'English,' his father replied abruptly, 'speak English.'

'I'm sorry, Father,' Alem continued. 'What will we do tomorrow, Father?'

'The holiday really starts tomorrow, young man. We will get a train into London and you will see all those famous places that you have seen in the books.'

And so it was. The next day they got a bus from Datchet to Reading and then a train from Reading into central London. In central London they boarded a sightseeing bus that took them to all the places they had seen in the books: Marble Arch, Piccadilly Circus, Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square, the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London. Back home

Alem had lived only in small cities or towns and although he had been to the Ethiopian capital, he had never seen anything like London. Cities back home were busy with cars racing everywhere, but here it was so busy that the cars were standing still in traffic jams most of the time. The fumes emitted by the cars made Alem cough, he wondered why everyone else wasn't coughing until he got used to it and stopped.

When Alem was small he would always say that he wanted to make buildings when he grew up. Now he was sophisticated enough to say that he wanted to be an architect, so the buildings in London really caught his imagination. What he really liked about the city was the way the old and the new stood side by side. He thought this was also true of some parts of Ethiopia. He had seen places like the ancient obelisks at Axum and the churches carved out of the mountains at Lalibela. He always thought that if he became an architect he would try to bring the old and the new together, he would try to put old features into modern buildings.

He spent the whole day imagining how he would change London if he had the chance, and working out what bits of London he would take back home if he could.

After a visit to the British Museum they wandered

down Charing Cross Road and found themselves in Leicester Square. Alem's father wasn't sure where to go. Darkness began to descend and the people around them looked younger. Alem's father gave him a choice; they could go back to Datchet straight away or stay in London to eat and return later. Alem decided to stay in central London.

'So what do you want to eat?' Alem's father asked, looking rather devious. 'In London you can eat anything, the choice is yours.' He opened the guidebook he was clutching. 'Not far from where we are standing there is French food, Indian food, Chinese food, Mexican, Spanish, Italian –'

'Italian,' Alem interrupted quickly. 'Italian food, they have Italian food here?'

'Yes, of course,' came the reply. 'Don't forget we are in Europe and Italy is not that far from here – so you want Italian?'

'Yes please, spaghetti, please!' Alem was jumping with excitement.

Spaghetti was one of Alem's favourite foods. The Italian army invaded Eritrea in 1882, and then in 1935 they entered Ethiopia. Unable to conquer the country, they were soon chased out, but they left behind tanks, unexploded bombs and spaghetti. It wasn't the kind of food that was cooked in the house but sometimes Alem had spaghetti at school or on special occasions in restaurants.

Alem's father checked his map and as they headed for Covent Garden, he began to question Alem. 'So, Mr Spaghetti Lover, do you know where spaghetti comes from?'

'Easy,' Alem replied confidently. 'Italy.'

'That is where it originated but where does the spaghetti we eat back home actually come from?'

'Italy.' Alem insisted.

'No, that's not so true.'

'Of course it comes from Italy. You told me that spaghetti comes from Italy, Father.'

'Well, the truth is that most of the spaghetti we eat back home is made back home, but the spaghetti that we get here will be the real spaghetti, spaghetti from Italy.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am very sure. I know these things, you know,' Alem's father replied jokingly. 'Spaghetti back home tastes African, spaghetti here will taste Italian, you wait and see.'

But Alem had a comeback. 'You may know that spaghetti back home is made back home, but how can you be sure that spaghetti here is not made here? Maybe every country makes its own spaghetti.'

His father was genuinely stuck. 'Well, now – you have got me there. You have a point.' He paused for a moment before letting his alternative theory be known. 'Well, OK, the spaghetti you get in England

may be made in England – but,' he said, raising a finger in the air, 'I bet that even the spaghetti that is made in England is made by Italians.'

Alem looked up at his father and raised an eyebrow, signifying that he was not so sure about his theory. Just then they found what was advertised in the guidebook as a genuine Italian restaurant, and there they ate spaghetti. Both agreed that the spaghetti tasted better than the spaghetti they got back home, but because neither of them could pluck up the courage to ask a waiter, the country of origin of the spaghetti was still unknown to them.

Soon they found themselves hurrying by Underground to Paddington station, where they managed to get the last train to Reading and from there the last bus to Datchet. The rush home seemed desperate but Alem loved the excitement of being out so late.

As the village clock struck midnight, they were just getting into bed. Alem was now reading the London guidebook while his father lay staring at the ceiling in deep contemplation.

Alem stopped reading and looked at his father. 'Father, can you hear that?' he said, turning his ear towards the window.

There was no response from his father.

'Father, can you hear that?'

Alem had caught his attention. 'I'm sorry, hear what?'

'Can you hear the nothing, Father? There are no animal noises – no birds, no donkeys, no hyenas, nothing.' As he finished speaking, a car roared through the streets.

'I don't think they have so many wild animals here, only wild drivers in loud cars,' his father replied as he sat up and looked towards Alem, whose bed was on the other side of the room. 'Did you have a good day, young man?'

'Yes, it was very good, Father. I liked all the buildings and the museum and I like also the food.'

'You should not say "I like also", you should say, "I also liked the food".'

'Yes, Father, I also liked the food,' Alem said, concentrating hard on his word order. 'Mother would like it too,' he continued, 'don't you think so, Father?'

'Yes, of course.' He got out of bed and crossed the room to sit on Alem's bed.

'What's the matter, Father?' Alem asked.

'Nothing,' he replied, sounding very serious. 'I just want you to know that your mother and I love you, son, and you know that anything we do is for the best. I have never been here but I know that England is a nice country, there are some good people here, you must remember that. And back home there are some good people too, not everyone back there wants to

fight the war, most people would love to just get on with their lives. So remember, there are good and bad everywhere and your mother and I have always tried to do the best for you because we want you to be one of the good ones. Not a brave African warrior, not a powerful man or a rich man or a great hunter, we just want you to be a good person. Always remember that.' He leaned down and kissed Alem on his forehead, then made his way back to his own bed.

'Father, is something wrong?'

'No, young man, I just want you to try and be a good person,' he said, turning off the light. 'Good night – Dehinaider.'

'Good night, Father – Dehinaider, abba,' Alem replied.