Prologue

We're clinging to each other, fistfuls of flesh and bone, and battering rams are smashing over our heads leaving us stingy-eyed, breathless, a woman and her child are clinging to one of my legs each, everyone is clinging to someone or something, and I almost envy the two tiny babies slung tight to their mothers who don't have a clue what this chaos is about, who don't understand the enormity of this terror, because there are way too many of us piled in here, we've created a death trap for each other, we know this, but we need each other too, we're all we've got left, and this might be the last group of faces I'll ever see, and I've never seen a group of faces so petrified, and I've seen a lot of petrified faces, and there's another one approaching, oh God, it's coming, it's coming, and we're rising, rising up – up and up and up – and this wave is taller than the tallest cliff and my stomach clenches and our boat is vertical now and I'm clinging on with all my strength and we're going to flip backwards and this is the end… but then we dip forward, just a little… and then we're nearly horizontal again – we're floating on nothingness, we're flying – and then we SLAP down on the water, and my brain explodes through my skull and the water is roaring and children are shrieking and women are wailing and men are sobbing, and I look beyond the boat and there's still nothing but this vast purple-grey sky bleeding into a desert of wetness you can't drink, with a furious monster thrashing underneath the surface, waiting to devour us, and why couldn't it have chosen a group of people who've had an easier life? – and now the child who's got hold of my leg has vomited in my lap but it doesn't matter, because we're rising again, oh God, we're rising, up and up and up and up…

Chapter 1: Jude

WELCOME TO HEAVEN, HOW ABOUT A CUP OF TEA?
The cold facts about immigration –
why so many asylum seekers head for Britain.

YK (Eritrea) v Home Office. That's all you have so far. It's 8 p.m. already, and you're supposed to submit the skeleton argument tomorrow. You were all set to leave chambers at 6 p.m., for once, when your clerk phoned. You so nearly didn't pick up, but the receiver tugged at your hand like a magnet.

'Brief's just come in for you, counsel's sick – skelly's due in the morning, papers being biked over now, all right?' he barked.

It wasn't really meant to be a question. But you still could have said no. You had the right to say no. You should have said no. But if you want to get decent work at the Bar you have start out as a Yes person, and as your old supervisor kept telling you, he got his breakthrough case by stepping in at the last minute. You trill your fingernails on the desk.

Back home, Alec will be listening to his final story before lights out. You're a terrible mother! You should be the one reading him *Burglar Bill*. He'll move onto books without pictures soon, and before you know it he'll be off to uni. You should be spending this precious time cultivating his language development, guiding him through important moral lessons like if you burgle tins of beans and bedpans from people's houses you have to give them back, or just feeling the warmth of his little body snuggled

against yours… But unless you have a career you can't even pay for the nursery fees you need so that you can *have* a career… oh, wait…

Anyhow, your papers will arrive any minute. You'll do the speediest prep possible, enough to wing it, then you'll jump on the Tube, and in half an hour you'll be back in your kitchen, making a cup of peppermint tea, then sitting on the edge of Alec's bed, touching your lips softly onto his apricot cheek, watching his silhouette gently rise and fall with his breath, letting yourself indulge in a moment of utter peace. And then you'll crash. Meanwhile…

You write the initials YK in your blue notebook, italicize them, doodle some flowers around them, and fill out the acronym in your head: *Yoghurty Koala. Yielding Kipper. Yesterday's Kleenex*. Your friends are probably all out having fun right now, on a night out at that new Brazilian place you had to pull out of last time because you were working, or seeing whatever the new film of the moment is… you're so out of the loop. None of them have procreated yet, or become obsessed with a futile desire to change the world. As a result, all of them appear to have managed to achieve a sane work–life balance involving that mystical thing called down time. You wouldn't change Alec for the world, of course. But why were you so obsessed by getting into human rights law? Why? The fees have got so low for publicly funded work that you won't make enough from this case to cover the weekly food shop. *Come on, YK. Yowling Kitten. Yachting King. Yossarian Killer.*

Your clerk finally lumbers in with two large boxes and dumps them on your desk. 'Enjoy. I'm off home,' he says, as if you'd be thrilled. This will take hours just to skim-read. You're tempted to throw them out of the window and jump after them – or at least just disappear from chambers for a while. You're so drained, and all you've got is a Snickers for dinner, and you're becoming a stranger to your little boy, not to mention his daddy, and right now you feel less like a human rights warrior and more like a masochist… You manage enough grace to say 'bye' but your clerk is already out of the door. His feet thump down the stairs, two at a time. You pull out the first file, and just after you extricate it from the box, it bursts. White sheets drift over your desk and across the floor like snow.

Max would love you to quit the Bar! He says it's not worth the stress. If you did quit you could start your own business, like screen-printing pretty muslin cloths, that idea you had when Alec was a baby – there's clearly a market among new mums who want to look artsy while mopping up sick – or maybe just trade barrister for barista, and get a no-stress nine to five in a hipster coffee shop. You'd probably make more money, in the short term anyway, and the pay would be regular. Or else, you and Max could shove all your stuff into storage and migrate somewhere exotic like Zanzibar, teach English, and sip coconut water as Alec splashes through turquoise waves and rides on dolphins.

You pull down a new ring binder from the cupboard, gather up the papers, stick them back in again, in order, which eats up at least fifteen minutes, then start to flick through. So, YK is a male… arrived from Eritrea a year ago… university… government job… writer… conscript… prison break… desert… boat… cabbage truck… and you share a birthday! Seriously, 2 March 1975 – what are the chances? Could he have been born at 8.20 a.m. as well? For your last birthday, Alec made his first ever card for you – a portrait of Mummy in crayon that looked like a warped tomato on stilts with spaghetti on top – and while you were blowing out the candles on Max's home-baked chocolate and raspberry cake, YK was probably… being smuggled through France? Cakeless and cardless, at any rate.

You go through his witness statement again, more slowly, and find you're gnawing your knuckles. This isn't a case you should be skim-reading. The reason you wanted to do this job is because people like YK have had the worst luck thrown their way, and all they get in return for escaping to a supposed safe place is a sea of newspaper headlines branding them liars, scroungers and criminals. At a moment as crucial as a tribunal hearing they need someone who will not only expend time and effort to put their case, but will actually care: that's you. That's why you're still here, when you could be reading *Burglar Bill* or ordering a caipirinha (probably not simultaneously). But, first things first, where is Eritrea exactly? Might be nice at least to locate it within the continent before you attempt to persuade a judge not to send someone back there.

The internet informs you that it's a moon-shaped sliver of coastline in East Africa, with mountains inland and coral reefs along the coast. Should be lush. But apparently it's an 'open prison'. Ethiopia is its next-door neighbour but also its worst enemy since they split up… after a *thirty-year-long* war. And then another war over the border… So in 1990, when you were on a camping holiday with your parents in the Lakes, pretending you were a *Swallows and Amazons* character, YK was stuck behind a front line. And in 1998, when you were doing your law conversion course and trying to get your head around trusts and torts, he was being conscripted. In 2001, when you were starting pupillage in the beautiful surrounds of Temple, his government announced the end of the free press. And in 2003, when you were stressing about leaving your beautiful baby boy in nursery so you could go back to your sought-after job after your maternity leave, he was being tortured in an underground oven.

After a bit more research, you find yourself clicking into a few diaspora blogs, expecting a barrage of outrage against the government, but while you do find a lot of that, you find a lot of defenders as well. It's like going down a rabbit hole into a world of patriotic passions, fierce emotions and vicious insults. But you've got to crawl out: you're seriously pressed for time now. You need to focus on the law, the expert reports, the evidence. You unwrap your Snickers, take a large bite, and read on.

If what he says is true, YK has lived a more terrifying life than you can contemplate enduring and remaining sane. But as you read his rejection letter from the Home Office, go through his witness statement again and note down questions you want to ask, a cynical voice in your head can't help asking: how much is he exaggerating? He claims he was imprisoned for writing articles criticizing the regime… but would he really have dared to do something *that* risky in a country *that* repressive? There's less press freedom there than in North Korea. And then to stage a prison break near a militarized border – is that even possible? It's ironic that the more oppressive the country, the harder it is to make any stories of resistance sound credible in a tribunal, when, if they were true, the case for asylum would be all the stronger. YK has also got zero hard evidence from Eritrea

to back up what he says, which of course makes sense if he had to flee, but never helps with credibility. Also, could his journey really have been *that* hair-raising? And why didn't he just seek asylum here sooner? Plus, you bet in person his English will be rubbish and he won't remember what his solicitor put in his statement and he'll come across as stilted and awkward and the judge will make him squirm.

You plough on, sticking Post-it notes on pages of the file and making lists. YK has got some good character witnesses, like Molly Muldoon, his English teacher, and Nina Lambourne, a friend who claims she trusts him enough to let him babysit her daughter… Doesn't that name ring a bell? Oh, and she's Molly's daughter. So how come she became friends with him? Not relevant, not relevant…

Your eyelids start dragging. You yawn, check your watch. It's late. Coffee is essential if you're going to get through this. You get up, stretch, and walk along the deserted corridor to the kitchen.

The ceiling light sputters and flickers as the kettle crackles. You've pretty much planned your argument now, and bullet-pointed the facts you need to prove. But it's funny – although you're frazzled, it's at moments like this that you wish your job went further, that you could know more, understand more. Sure, maybe it is a big enough challenge to take a mountain of legal documents and adapt them into a convincing account of someone's life constructed solely from words and facts that can be evidentially proven and are appropriate to the context, and tessellate all that into a persuasive argument about legal merit. It's a high-stakes brainteaser. But however well you solve that puzzle, and however well YK performs as a witness, at the end of the hearing he'll still be a mystery to you. You'll never know the truth. *Truth.* Well, you will have a handle on the kind of truth that the law demands – a cluster of facts weighty enough to tip the case over the balance of probabilities – but what you'd love to get a sense of is the truth of what it has felt like to be YK, Yonas Kelati, the living, breathing human being, your birthday twin. At least solicitors get to spend time with their clients, taking statements. Barristers barely get to meet them, usually. You wish you could dive inside the pages of

these case files and swim around underneath the text to find out what your life would have been like if you and YK happened to have been switched at birth.

You pour out hot water, stir in two spoons of instant coffee with two heaped spoons of chocolate powder, splosh in the last of the communal milk, and sit down on the spare chair by the photocopier. After the first hot, bittersweet sip, you close your eyes. Imagine if, instead of meeting YK at the tribunal hearing, you could meet him for a coffee – not a vile mocha like the one you've just made, but a nice cappuccino in your local café with the comfy armchairs – and introduce yourself, not as his barrister, but just as Jude, a random British woman who happens to be exactly the same age. After some small talk you could mention that you'd be interested to know more about him and what led him here, and let him tell his story in his own words, while you probe subtly for details along the way, as any friend might do, allowing the conversation to branch and spiral beyond that square box labelled legal relevance.

Imagine if you could do the same with the other witnesses too. You could invite them each to tell you how they got to know YK, and find out what they really think of him. Yes, that part would be like when you were introduced to Max's friends and family: you thought you had the measure of your boyfriend, but they gave you a clearer sense of who he was before you came along, and illuminated quirks of his personality. The way Max knocks on his teeth with his fist while trying to make a decision, as if he were asking his inner oracle for permission to enter? His circumspect dad does exactly the same. By the end of a marathon of chats and coffees you'd be bouncing off the walls, but you would also be able to adapt all the sterile witness statements in this ring binder into something resembling stories.

You could go further, and adapt YK's story into a third-person narrative like the kind you normally get in an asylum judgment, but more red-blooded and visceral. You'd go way beyond that *Miller v Jackson* judgment you learned about at law school, where Lord Denning started off by waxing lyrical about a summertime cricket match, in order to cement his legal argument about nuisance. You'd go the whole way, turning

law into literature. But how would that help YK? You could kidnap the immigration judge listed for YK's hearing, borrow her robes and pose as her while you read out your own prose to the tribunal, and conclude triumphantly that the appeal has succeeded… Oh, except you'd have to be there to listen to the judgment, as YK's barrister. And you'd probably end up jailed yourself.

Anyhow, you've finished your drink, so it's time to stop fantasizing and get back to work. But, when you sit at your desk again, your fingers seem to get a will of their own and start typing words into an online search box: *Eritrean restaurant London*. Your mouse clicks on a link. The food looks pretty good – lots of big pancake-type things and curries. You imagine taking YK and your solicitor there after the hearing to celebrate your win, and inviting him to choose the dishes… It'll probably never happen. There probably won't be an appropriate moment to ask, and anyway he might have no interest in getting to know you, might not care at all that you share a birthday, might not want to let you into any more details about his parallel, polar-opposite life. But you can at least make it a belated New Year's resolution to step away from Pizza Express and drag your family along to eat some authentic Eritrean food one day, if you ever get time off work, to close your eyes while chewing, to immerse yourself in the new flavour sensations on your tongue…

Chapter 2: Yonas

CEREAL OFFENDERS: ASYLUM SEEKER GANG COLLECTED £24 MILLION DRUG MONEY IN SPECIAL K BOXES

It was the ninety-third morning. Yonas picked up a shrimp, tore off its head, pulled off its tail, eased away its leg-fringed shell, then tossed the shell in a bucket to the right, dropped the flesh onto the pile to the left, and grabbed another, then tore off its head, pulled off its tail, and on, and on… until his numb fingertips fumbled, and a shrimp dropped to the floor. He stopped and stared at it for a moment. Lying there. Taunting him. He felt like lying down on the floor and curling up next to it. As he finally bent to grasp it, his spine made a cracking noise and a twinge spiked across his lower back. He straightened up, tentatively, stretched his arms and felt his shoulders crunch. The others were all hunched over cockles, mussels, oysters and crabs, and he imagined the whole lot of them solidifying and being found in here one day by a bunch of archaeologists, frozen in time like statues in a derelict church, with rotting shellfish strewn around their feet.

His stomach growled, reminding him that, by some miracle, he was still alive. Before he knew it he would be free to go out to a restaurant to eat a tasty meal with a bottle of beer on the side, and even some fresh fruit afterwards if he felt like it. What he would give right now for the

zingy fragrance of a mango, fresh from the garden, newly sliced, glistening gold and dripping with juice! Saliva gushed around his tongue.

He blew pointlessly on his fingers, and turned the next shrimp around in his palm, picturing the beast when it was still alive, pottering along the seabed, waving its whiskers, unaware that it was about to be scooped up and boiled. He broke the shell open and extracted the flesh. When it dried, its colour would intensify and it would shrink into a crescent bead. He could string a collection into a necklace for little Lemlem… but she wouldn't be so little any more. It had been over a year since he'd seen her running around on those chubby legs. How great it would be to hear her voice chirping down a phone. Better still, to have her run through the door squealing *Uncle Yonas!*, reaching her arms out to be picked up, tossed in the air and spun around…

A sharp slap on the back of his head jarred his neck, and grey sparkles danced before his eyes. 'Get on with it,' Aziz barked.

Yonas felt like jumping up, kicking his stool away, chucking his entire bucket of shrimp shells over Aziz's ugly, balding head, then roaring: *You get on with it! We're out of here!*

But Gebre was hissing at him: 'Eh! M*elehaye!*' his face peeking around a mountain of scallops. 'While you were daydreaming over there I started my fourth bucket. I'm being tipped for promotion.' He flicked a shell into the air so it spun down and landed with a clink.

Yonas laughed, as much in surprise as at the joke. He couldn't remember when Gebre was last in a good enough mood to banter, but then one of them had always tried to pep up the other if they were down. 'No chance, my friend,' he retorted. 'You're the donkey to my racehorse.'

'There's only one donkey in here,' Gebre said, 'and I'm talking to him.'

'If you weren't the donkey you'd have noticed that my shrimps are a quarter the size of your scallops so my buckets take way longer to fill. Which means I can take time out and still go faster than you.'

Gebre cackled. 'Listen, one of your shrimps is about the size of your—'

But Aziz was approaching Gebre from behind now, and before Yonas had time to gesture a warning, his friend had been yanked around. 'What did I tell you,' Aziz snarled, snout to nose, then let go suddenly, so that

Gebre nearly toppled. Then he looked over to Yonas. 'Stop slacking, both of you, and get on with your fucking work,' he said, and skulked off to his den again, mumbling something that sounded like 'fed up with managing reprobates'. A piece of paper taped to his door stated OFFICE NO ENTER in unequivocal red marker.

Gebre's face crumpled into its default frown, his liveliness fading as quickly as it had appeared. He absently gnawed at a well-chewed fingernail, then got back to his shelling. *We have to get out of here*, Yonas thought. It was crazy to have been in the UK all this time and still to have no sense of what this country was actually like.

Their arrival felt like yesterday and for ever ago. Yonas remembered so clearly when they first walked in, both of them so weak they could barely stand, but still vaguely elated at having survived, together, through everything. When he registered how dank and eerie the factory was, Yonas's first reaction was to think he must be hallucinating, that in his fatigue he'd dreamed up some kind of ghost story set in Victorian Britain. He'd uttered a staccato laugh – but the sound had reverberated back at him, and a couple of the other workers had glanced up, confused. The place was dimly lit, with only narrow shafts of daylight struggling through boarded-up windows, and the workers wore glazed, otherworldly expressions. The ceiling was high, and charred remains of timbers were dotted along the wall where the first floor must once have been. The kitchen on the back wall consisted of a big vat perched on a tiny gas burner, like an oversized owl on a twig. The bathroom comprised two industrial sinks with a hosepipe shower, and the toilet was in a shed outside with no lock. Sharing it between nineteen other men meant it was never free when you needed it. But at least there was a toilet. Yonas thought back to those interminable days in the lorry through the Sahara, how he'd had to close off the top of his throat and breathe through his mouth so that he couldn't smell the foul cocktail of piss and shit and vomit, and later the sickly sweet infusion of decomposing human flesh. Yes, this place might be an improvement, but that didn't make it endurable. This was the UK, after all.

On the very first morning in the factory, when they could have slept for another twenty-four hours, they hauled themselves up, stiff as rusted

robots, and Aziz put them straight to work. New crates of shellfish were delivered before dawn, and they all had to be rinsed, the bad ones discarded, the rest graded and sorted, then shelled or polished, cooked up or chilled, potted or packed, and finally re-loaded into the crates and lugged back outside for collection. Buckets and tools had to be emptied and cleaned, stray shells and seaweed fronds swept up, floors mopped. It wasn't as if Yonas hadn't anticipated some drudgery when he first got here – they had to pay back the smugglers after all – but he hadn't expected to be stuck in a place this grim without any pay at all. So much for his university degree. If it weren't for that stupid war, he might be at work right now in a warm office, with his own desk under a fan, wearing a thin, crisp shirt, writing something, coming up with new ideas… The only thing going for this place was the hope that they'd end up with papers, a ray of light that was diminishing daily. Ninety-three days…

The shrimp shells started to cut into Yonas's scarred finger pads, and pinkish blood began seeping out. The point of a headache drilled into his skull. It was so damply cold here, he felt like mould was growing into his bones. He jiggled his feet and waggled his fingers in an attempt to get some feeling back.

A rumbling came from above: rain dancing on the roof. Drips began to splat on the floor in syncopated rhythms, and the radio crackled into 'Billie Jean'. Yonas looked over at Gebre, trying in vain to catch his eye, hoping for a sign that he too was remembering his attempt to moonwalk all the way to school.

That evening it was Yonas's turn to make dinner, and Aziz, with a vindictive look in his eyes, paired him up with Samuel, who never seemed to utter more than a monosyllable. Yonas surveyed the ingredients glumly. 'Well, there's not much oil left,' he said, 'so how about we boil the pasta and potatoes, put chunks of that plastic cheese on top, and steam those reject mussels?'

Samuel nodded blankly.

'We'll get about two runts each from that lot if we're lucky,' Yonas added.

Samuel just stared at the reject mussels, expressionless.

'I'd give anything for a big, tasty lamb zigni stew with rice right now, and some herbs and spices, and vegetables – wouldn't you?' Yonas persisted. 'If you could eat any other dish in the world, what would it be? Come on. Your favourite! You must have one.'

Samuel thought, long and hard, or so it appeared. Then he just shrugged.

Yonas tipped potatoes from the sack into buckets, got two nail-brushes, told Samuel to scrub one bucketful, and started on the other. Dirt clouded into the water and embedded under his fingernails. He considered his chances of supplementing the mussels with some of the scallops that were intended for customers, and glanced over at Petros who was on enforcement duty, looking bored. After a few minutes his bulbous head began to nod. Yonas trod softly over to the scallops, and reached for a handful.

'Er, we're not allowed those ones,' Samuel said dozily.

Yonas only just managed to snatch his hand back before Petros sat up to see what was going on. 'I'm going to take a leak,' he said, and walked outside.

Once he got through the door he punched his fists at the dark and yelled, 'GET ME OUT OF HERE' – noiselessly, and to nobody in particular. He took a few deep breaths before going in again.

Once dinner was ready, Yonas banged the ladle on the vat lid. The others mooched over, collected plastic bowls, and held them out. He swallowed his own gloopy portion as fast as possible, as most of them did, and watched Gebre pick listlessly at his. Just before bed, he beckoned Gebre outside.

'It's time,' he said. 'Let's cut our losses and go.'

'What, now? In the dark?'

'Harder for them to find us.'

'What about our papers?'

'We're never getting papers – we've been slaving here for three months now. We must have earned enough to pay off our debts. And I feel so guilty about Melat: the police will be onto her about me and she'll be

hounded for diaspora tax, and Sheshy needs prosthetics and Lemlem needs school fees. . . I've got to wire them some money.'

Gebre looked away, then down at his feet. 'I know, but Blackjack promised we'd get papers, and that must take some time.'

'Ninety-three days?'

'Maybe. And anyway, if we leave with nothing, and it's too late for asylum, we'll just get locked up then sent back. I'd rather kill myself.'

'Hey, stop that! Look, we've done amazingly to make it here, but now it turns out we're being used, we just have to keep going a bit longer, and then we can make a life for ourselves. A life where we at least get to earn money and have a bit of freedom and self-respect. Also, don't we owe it to all the people who didn't make it here to *do* something with this chance? Remember—'

'Don't make me.'

'Okay, but—'

'Aziz will kill us. He's got a gun, Rashid said.'

'I doubt it. He'd have waved it in our faces by now if he had. I reckon he's just blustering. Anyway, he can hardly leave the factory with no one except Petros in charge and come on a wild goose chase for us, can he?'

'He can call Blackjack.'

They had only met Blackjack once, when he came to do an inspection, a white guy dressed all in black, with sunglasses when there was no sun, his only decoration a fat gold watch. He had effected a miracle transformation on their boss when he stepped in the door, turning Aziz from a glowering tyrant into a smiling sycophant.

'I bet he's posturing too. Playing the tough guy.'

'He scares Aziz though.'

This seemed true. 'Still, I doubt he would waste his time sending people after us,' Yonas said.

'But we've got no money. We don't even know where we are…'

'We can find a way! I'm pretty sure we're north of London, just from reading the local newspaper. And once we call Auntie, she can direct us.'

'But if we just had our papers…'

'Gebre, that's not going to happen! And this place is making you more depressed by the day. You know you're like a brother to me – I don't want to sit here and watch you morph into a mollusc. Worse, into Samuel.'

This at least produced a flicker of a grin. 'Two more weeks then?'

Yonas sighed. 'Okay. If you insist. But let's sneak out on a Friday during free time to plan a route, okay?'

Back inside he grabbed his sleeping mat, rolled it out, lay down, pulled his blanket over his head, and willed himself to go to sleep quickly to avoid Rashid's tank-engine snore.

Drifting off, he pictured himself hand in hand with Sarama, sneaking off from the barracks, clambering up the mountain path, turning down a goat track and pushing through bushes until they reached their secret spot, where they fell on each other, where nothing else mattered, and then lay there, warm and entangled, looking up at the wide sky, azure and beautiful above the filth as if the war didn't exist, as he stroked her hair and touched her dimpled cheeks…

He was woken by moaning in his left ear. In the dimness he saw Gebre's head rolling from side to side, arms poker-straight, forehead crumpled. The moan grew louder, Gebre's body jerked, and he shocked himself awake. Yonas reached out and put his hand gently on his friend's arm in the dark. The skin was clammy. Gebre twitched, froze, then curled into a foetal position. Yonas resigned himself to wakefulness for a while. He rummaged around in the dark until he felt his little wooden rooster, extricated it from his pocket, held it lightly between his fingers, then enclosed it tight in his palm. He wondered whether underneath Rashid's snores he could hear the sea, or whether it was only the shushing of the others' sleeping breath.

Another drizzly morning followed, with no visible chink in the cloud. The new crates were filled with crabs, piled and twisted together. Some were dead or not far off, but many were still alive, moving their pincers feebly, waving for help. One was valiantly attempting to clamber to the top of the pile. It struggled upwards, slipped back, and climbed up again. It was as if it had already seen the vat inside. *It's too late for you, my friend*, Yonas told it. The crab pawed vainly at the crate wall.

Chapter 3: Joe

ASYLUM SEEKER TRAVELS 50 MILES TO BRITAIN STRAPPED UNDER SCHOOL TRIP COACH… AND EMERGES WITH A GRIN AND THUMBS-UP

Oh go on then, I'll have a coffee. Which type, did you say? Just normal, like, milk and two sugars. Americano? If you say so.

So, you want to know about how I met that African lad. I don't know, that's got to be one of the oddest things that's ever happened to me. For starters, in that neck of the woods you don't come across many people, you know, that colour… or anyone, like, it's just fields and that. And he sprung me out of the blue… what-d'you-call-it… ambushed me! It were outside this old farm building down a track off Blithe Lane.

Things had been a bit fishy with that place for a while. In more ways than one. Ha! Anyway, it used to be a little arable farm, but it got a bit run-down, and I remember folks saying the farmer were in debt, and then there were a fire – that some said weren't an accident – and then he sold the fields off. Not long after, we heard he'd passed. But he were a loner type, Bill Hardy. No one really seemed to know him personally, and apparently his son lived abroad, so I didn't know what were going on for a while, but it seemed like the farm business had folded cos I'd pass the track on me route and the buildings down there just looked empty. But then one day I spotted some lights on, and I thought, hmm, what's going on there then, and a couple of weeks later I got told it were back

on me route. Sure enough, when I drove down, a couple of big rubbish sacks were out waiting for me, and I saw some movement in one of the windows. The sacks stank of fish, and I thought, well, this ain't farming again is it – what are the new folks up to? I decided to mind me own business and just chucked the sacks into the truck. But a few days later, I were about to pick up some more when this bloke came out.

Now this weren't our African lad, not yet – this one were a chunky Paki-looking bloke, and that threw me too, you know what I mean, around here! I said hello, and asked what were planned for the farm now. He looked kind of nervous, said summat about getting things set up for a new farm and retail business. And then he went: 'It would be good for people who ask if you can say that is what we are doing,' and held out twenty quid! Said he'd really appreciate it, and looked right in me eyes. Nowt like that happened to me before, I can tell you.

'So… you'd sort me out like this next week and all?' I asked.

'Every week,' he said. 'I can leave money under there.' He pointed out a lump of rock close to the rubbish sacks.

I were a bit torn then. I mean, I were pretty sure it must be summat dodgy. But the wife and me were under pressure with money and that, what with me son being expelled and me daughter dyslexic and there being no work for young'uns round here these days. Not to mention she's a stickler for the accounts, the old lady, and so I have to give her every penny and I'm only allowed three pints a week. So an extra few quid weren't going to do me any harm.

And it weren't as if I knew what were going on exactly. I mean, this bloke could've been planning to set up summat legit soon enough. Anyway, I were only a bin man so who were really going to ask me anyway?

And he kept his word. Every week, cash were under that rock like he said. I could even get rounds in for the lads down the pub. I took to joining them earlier, got me pool skills up to scratch, and after a month or so I were king of the table for winner-stays-on for the first time ever! I saved up a bit and got meself a nice bottle of Scotch and a flask to keep me goin' on a chilly morning on the round.

Didn't get away with it for long though. That's marriage for you! One

day, when I got back late from the pub, Jill were waiting in the kitchen, hands on her hips, and she went: 'What's got into you, Joe? You never used to stay out till closing.'

'Leave it out, will you,' I said.

'I hardly see you any more,' she said, *nag nag nag*. 'And you always come home smelling of whisky these days. I don't like it and I don't know how you're paying for it.'

'Aw come on, it's just the odd nightcap, love. Don't start naggin' now, will you?'

Should've known that'd wind her up. 'I'll say what I like!' she said. 'Go on, tell me, how can you be affording whisky every night when you always used to moan about how much I let you take out of the kitty?'

'The lads are a generous bunch,' I said.

'Come off it, Joe, they're as tight as you.'

'Well if you must know,' I said, 'I've got nifty on the pool table. Found meself on a winning streak.'

'Oh pull the other one,' she said. 'I used to thrash you at pool, and I've got the hand–eye coordination of a… I don't know. A penguin.'

'Penguins don't have hands, Jill.'

'Exactly,' she said, all smug.

'Well,' I said, 'why don't you join the lads at the pub tomorrow then, and see me skills for yourself?' I wished I hadn't said that, soon as it came out me mouth. Knowing Jill, she would and all and I'd get all nervous and fluff it up. But luckily she said she'd got better things to do.

Anyway, I'd got to the point where I'd almost forgotten there were anything unusual about that building, and it were just a normal drizzly morning when I were driving up the track and in me mirrors I saw summat moving in the bushes and then pop out – guessed it were a deer or summat – but it were that black African lad! And he jumped on the back of me truck, quick as a flash. Nearly give me the fright of me life! It were like seeing a ghost… but the opposite colour – ha! Anyway, I braked, opened the door, and looked out at him. 'All right there?' I asked. He got off, and I thought he might make a run for it, but he

walked towards me. He were wearing worker's overalls and they were right filthy. He were youngish, thirties I'd say, pale brown skin, tall and skinny as a rake with matted hair and a beard, and I wondered if he were one of them jihad terrorists about to hijack me or summat. But then I thought, they're normally Arabs. And then I thought, Why would a bloke do summat like that out here to a bloke like me? He didn't say a word at first, just stared, and I couldn't tell if he were scared or crazy. I wondered if he'd escaped from some loony asylum or if he were illegal, one of them that are supposed to be all over the shop. So I told him I'd better be on me way.

But he burst out: 'Wait! Please wait. Sir, I'm lost, can you please take me to the train station?'

I'd never been called *sir* in me life, and it were such an odd thing to hear, it made me laugh. But how could you get lost trying to get to the train station out here? And why did he jump on the back? Didn't sound right.

'Not on my route,' I told him. 'Sorry. And I'd better be going, so if you could move aside…'

'Please,' he said, and there were this look in his eyes, this desperation. 'You can drop me anywhere.'

Now, normally I do like to pick up the odd hitchhiker. Used to hitch meself back in the day. But no one'd ever hitched a ride in me rubbish truck before! Most folks who walk past it hold their noses, and folks wrinkle their noses up at me when I'm in me work gear in a shop or summat – and I'm used to that now. But he didn't seem to mind. Probably smelled himself but I'm immune to that. I could've told him just to get out the way again, but I remember what that were like, when people told me to move it when I really needed to get somewhere and I could see they had room. But then I thought, if I take this lad along, I might stop getting the weekly tip. But then another part of me felt bad for taking it in the first place.

So then I thought, what the heck, and told him to hop in. As we got further up the track I noticed he kept on looking in the rear-view mirror,

like he were spooked. And when we got to the main road he went, 'Thank you, you've saved me.'

I wished he hadn't said that. I said it weren't a problem. But then I couldn't stop meself asking what country he were from.

Oh Lord, now, what were it he said? To be honest I hadn't heard of the place. It were in Africa, close to Ethiopia, I remember that much, and I felt bad then. 'I remember those pictures on the telly in the eighties,' I told him. 'Kids with bellies popping out.' It were horrible, that famine, horrible. I hadn't thought about it for a while. 'Were it like that in your country?' I asked him. He said that they used to be the *same country* in the eighties. News to me! Geography were never me strong suit. Well anyway, then I felt all right, like I were actually doing a good deed by giving this poor lad a lift, like I were finally doing something for all them starving kids, not just watching them on telly and donating a couple of quid to Bob Geldof and feeling pretty useless. And then he asked me if I knew London.

'Not well,' I told him. 'Too hectic for me down there. I've got a brother who lives in the East End though. Moved there not long ago and got himself a job. Place called Canning Town. Haven't visited him yet. Should get round to it. So – what brought you to England then?'

'Just to live,' he said. I guessed then he were after benefits, like they say, you know, and fair play, in a way – I mean, I suppose you would be, coming from somewhere like that. But he added: 'And work.'

'Oh right,' I said. 'What kind of work?'

'Anything,' he said. 'If it pays some money. Even cleaning toilets would be good just now.'

'Well, who knows,' I said, 'you might even find a bin man job, there's worse things!' And he laughed. 'You go for it, lad,' I said. 'So, when d'you get here then?'

He took a while to answer, till I thought maybe he hadn't heard the question. Then he said, 'Not long ago. Actually I already started work, but I was working for a bad man.'

I didn't like the sound of that. 'Long flight to get here, was it?' I asked him, to change t'subject.

He laughed. 'I didn't fly,' he said. 'First we had to walk through the desert for four days with no food. We only survived because we came across a shepherd's water container in a valley so we could drink, and the hyenas decided not to eat us.'

I looked at him, and nearly laughed, like – you *what*?

'Then, for some time we were living in a lorry, a bit like this one,' he said. 'But stuck inside a box on the back, with no room to sit down, and it was as hot as an oven – and the smell was worse than this.'

'Ha!' I laughed. 'Come on now. Not many folk would say that about a rubbish truck smell.'

'Maybe they haven't smelled—' then he stopped.

'Smelled what?! Dead people?' I laughed at me own joke, even though it were a bit dark, like.

But he weren't laughing. He looked out the window. Didn't deny it. I mean, he could have said he were just being *polite* about me truck or summat! I felt queasy all of a sudden. This were creepy, like. Were he saying they'd been *murdered*, these dead people he were travelling with? Were *he* the killer? Were he about to finish me off and all? Me heart started going then, nineteen to't dozen, I tell you. Tricky thing to hijack though, a rubbish truck. I mean, you'd get spotted pretty quick, wouldn't you? Couldn't get up much of a speed. And this lad seemed polite, anyway, not like a killer. Maybe there weren't actually dead people in a lorry with him – maybe he just didn't *say* there *weren't*. If you know what I mean.

'We came in a boat, for the last part,' he told me.

'Who's we then?' I asked. 'Did you come with family?'

'With a friend,' he said, 'who is like my brother.' But he didn't tell me nowt more, and to be honest I'd heard enough. Can of worms, I'd got to thinking.

'Well, you're probably doing the right thing, heading to London now,' I said, trying to sound cheery. 'Tough to get any kind of work round here these days, so no point you hangin' around. I'm sure you'll settle into the Big Smoke, no worries.'

I switched on Radio 2. There were Bryan Adams on, and then Bob Dylan – 'Like a Rolling Stone', you know the one. And then your lad

started singing along! He knew the lyrics – I mean, word for word. I had no clue they listened to that sort of thing in Africa! Thought they were more into drumming or reggae or whatever. But anyway it were quite funny – I ended up joining in, and we were there driving to town, the two of us, singing like we were a couple of mates who'd just left the pub on New Year's Eve. And I thought: this lad is all right!

Soon enough we got to the station. 'Here we are then,' I said.

He were about to get out, but then he stopped and asked for me phone number. Pulled a crumpled piece of newspaper out of his pocket for me to write on.

I weren't keen about that. I mean, I had started to warm to him a bit, but once you write stuff down and give out your details – you know? But he said he didn't know anyone in the UK yet, and maybe we could meet again some day as he'd like to say thanks. Just so bloody polite! There were loads of reasons to say no. But then he'd come from that country with the starving kids, and he'd travelled all the way here on his tod, in some kind of grave on wheels – and the lad knew all the bloomin' words to 'Like a Rolling Stone'! So I scribbled it down.

As I drove off down the road I kicked meself. Not literally. But I just felt like I'd been a softie, and I started to get worried about what might happen. For all I knew he could be a criminal. I could've aided and abetted. But I tried to put it all out of me mind and think of it as a good deed. And that were that, for a long while anyway. The twenty-quid notes kept on coming, and I stayed king of the pool table for a month, till some young upstart came along. Assumed I'd never hear from the African lad again. And after a week or two of having strange dreams with corpses stuffed like sardines in the back of me rubbish truck, things went back to normal and I very nearly forgot all about him.

Chapter 4: Yonas

MIGRANT SHAMBLES: EU 'HAS SURRENDERED COMPLETE CONTROL OF ITS BORDERS TO PEOPLE SMUGGLERS'

On Friday morning, Yonas went outside to collect the new deliveries and jogged on the spot for a minute, trying to pump some blood back into his toes. Beyond the fence, a pinkish sky illuminated the scattering of copper and mustard leaves among the dense bushes. Some were already forming a squidgy layer on the cracked concrete. As he looked up the track, his feet itched at the prospect of getting out. Only a few hours to go before the scoping walk.

He reached out to pick up the topmost crate of scallops, and its newspaper lining caught his eye.

TORTURED ASYLUM SEEKER FRAUDULENTLY CLAIMED £21,000 IN BENEFITS WHILE EARNING £2,000 A MONTH

£21,000? That sounded like a lot! Even £2,000 sounded like a lot. Could this story be made up? But this was the UK, and newspapers here were regulated – didn't they have a duty to present facts? Still… He tore out the headline carefully, put it in his pocket, and lugged the crate inside.

For the rest of the morning he worked faster than usual, with jiggling feet. In anticipation of the walk he thought back to his military service days, how impatiently he'd look forward to striding out of the barracks,

up that long, stony path all the way up to the Eye, a hole in the rock that was big enough to sit in, to curve your spine into its shape, smoothed by the weather and the years and countless other human forms, and rest for a while, absorbing the rippling mountainscape, free for a precious moment just by rising above it all. When the wind was easterly the Eye would emit a low wail, like a giant flute.

At noon, Aziz started caterwauling his call to prayer and pulled out the frayed carpet, marking the start of free time. While he and the other Muslims prostrated themselves, everyone else sat around and played mancala games or snoozed. Yonas leaned against the wall preparing to read his saved sheets of newspaper, but Osman's wheezy cough sounded beside him. 'Yonas, can you help practise my English?'

'Sure,' he said, swallowing his irritation. 'Take a seat. Why don't you start from here, the bit about the football team?'

Osman stumbled along, tracing his finger at a snail's pace underneath the words. He was a cute kid, seventeen at most, and the only other person in the factory who showed any interest in reading, in finding out more about this country they were in, anticipating more than mere survival. Meanwhile Gebre was watching a mancala game with a vacant expression. Yonas chipped in now and then to correct Osman's pronunciation or explain a definition, and time dawdled on. But finally prayers were over, Petros went out, and Aziz retreated to his den, from where a rhythmic snore signalled the start of his nap. Yonas told Osman to carry on reading while he went to the toilet, got up and went out, nudging Gebre on his way.

As planned, Gebre followed him. 'Okay, let's go!' Yonas whispered.

But Gebre shook his head. 'I've been thinking – it's too risky. If we're going for good on Monday, let's just figure out a route then, on the fly.'

He had a point. But Yonas wanted so badly to get beyond the fence. 'I think we should plan,' he said. 'But I'll just go solo if you don't want to.'

He crossed the yard, clambered over the gate and started up the hill. But then he heard footsteps. He turned with a flicker of panic – but it was Gebre, after all! Yonas grinned, held up his palm for a high-five and they carried on side by side. The sun was struggling through thick

swathes of cloud and the wind strengthened as they climbed. It felt so good to be moving. 'So, we'll get to a higher point,' Yonas said, 'and work out a direction, some landmarks, sketch out in our heads a rough route that seems like it's away from main roads with foliage to hide in… We'll travel mainly at dawn and dusk, find odd jobs, dry places to sleep, and then once we get to London—' He stopped. Grabbed Gebre's shoulder. Yes: footsteps again. They turned, expecting to see Petros with a snarl on his face.

'Osman!' Yonas laughed incredulously. 'What are you doing?'

'I want to come,' the kid said. 'Where are you going?'

'Just for a walk. But if Aziz finds out…'

'I don't care.'

'You should,' Gebre said.

'You can't stop me.' For a moment, Osman looked exactly like Yonas's little brother Tekle, with those stubborn, pleading eyes, those puppy eyebrows.

'Come on then!' Yonas relented, and jabbed Gebre in the ribs. 'Race you to the top!' To his surprise, Gebre took off as if he'd got new batteries. Yonas pounded behind, energy streaming into his blood, laughter making him gasp for air. His feet thundered, his stiff, cold muscles came painfully to life, his arms pumped like pistons, his lungs were about to explode, his whole body was on fire, but he carried on regardless.

When they finally made it, panting, to the crest of the hill, they were struck in the face by a blast of salty wind. Blood thumped in Yonas's temples as he let out a whoop. Gebre bent forward, hands on his knees, puffing steam into the air. Osman, wheezing, finally made it to join them. About a mile down the slope ahead, and stretching out indefinitely, was the sea.

It wasn't bright blue or gleaming like the Red Sea, or violent and terrible like the Mediterranean. It was a soft, deep grey flecked with white foam like a scattering of goose feathers. A few birds hovered over it, frolicking in the wind, making light of its huge scale, a scale that brought back the terror… and yet, from this safe vantage point, the sight was

liberating. Reaching out his arms like a champion sprinter, Yonas flung back his head and inhaled into parts of his lungs he had forgotten existed.

Gebre stood with his feet wide, hands on hips, shaking his head, a smile transforming his face. 'It is good to be out of there,' he said.

Yonas nodded sagely. 'I told you so.'

'All right, all right, you didn't paint this view.'

'I made this whole sea out of my saliva,' Yonas said. 'You should start worshipping me like I deserve.'

'Idiot', Gebre said, shoving him gently, then flopped down on the ground. Yonas copied, feeling almost drunk on the lightness of laughter and the weight of his body on the earth and the intense, sharp scent of damp grass.

Eventually he sat up, and leaned on his elbows. The sky to the south was blue-green, like the inside of a duck egg shell, and splashed with drifting clouds, but to the north a malevolent purple mass was forming. He closed his eyes, and let the wind pummel his cheeks. Feeling his sweat cool, he shivered, rubbed his arms and sat up straight. 'Okay – we're supposed to be planning a route here, and then we should head back,' he said, and began to scan the inland horizon. There was no sign of a town; the only buildings visible were an industrial-looking complex and some clusters of houses in the distance. Yonas figured if they followed the coastline southwards for a while they would be able to get quite a long way unnoticed, before working out a way to call Auntie. Gebre was still lying down with his eyes closed and a serene look on his face. Yonas cast around for Osman. He looked behind, and either side – and then spotted him, running down the hill ahead, at full pelt towards the sea.

He grabbed Gebre's arm. 'Look! Osman – he's running off!'

Gebre jerked upright, then they both scrambled to their feet. 'Osmaaaaan!'

'He can't hear. But they might hear us at the factory if we yell any more. We'll never catch him and get back on time…'

'*Donkoro*. I knew something like this would happen,' Gebre groaned. 'We shouldn't have let him come.'