

Foreword - P. Dudman & R. Hashem, Living Refugee Archive, University of East London	13
Introduction	17
<i>Arriving...</i>	37
1. <i>Living in heaven</i> Ruth, from the African bushlands	42
2. <i>Nothing to be ashamed of</i> Hanh, from the Vietnamese 'Boat People'	57
3. <i>Seven years a political prisoner</i> Talya, from an occupied territory in the Middle East	69
4. <i>I was an engineer</i> Samir, from a manor estate in East Africa	81
5. <i>They would kill me if they could</i> Fatima, from a Sharia regime	93
6. <i>Friends stab you in the front</i> Saoirse, from the Catholic Republic of Ireland	109
7. <i>Stand up high and put your thinking straight</i> Habibah, from West Africa	121
8. <i>'Sex-kitten for personal use'</i> Fionn, from the war in Northern Ireland	137
9. <i>Escaping the Nazis</i> Stefan, from a Nazi labour-camp in Poland	157
10. <i>The feeling of exile</i> Adar, from Kurdistan	177
11. <i>I could not leave without giving them something</i> Kanwar, from a Syrian refugee camp	189
<i>Appreciating...</i>	211
Conclusion	217
Afterword - T. Sweeney, former Mayor of Cambridge & D. Minns, Cambridge Womens' Resources Centre	231
Appendix - Programme of policy actions with communities	236
About the author	243



## Arriving...

Glancing at the clipboard of notes on the lectern in front of me, I start to speak. This is what I'm here to do. I've just arrived from Paris to take up a position at Cambridge University, and I've been invited to give a lecture on one of my specialist areas - life in cities. Specifically, on the *flâneur*, that outsider figure (originally in Paris but later in any city) who wanders through the back-streets, noticing and writing about things that others ignore. The students' eyes fix on me, glittering and avid. With exams looming, they hover between focus and panic - little Rottweilers of the intellect, hungry for any tidbit that could claw a few extra marks.

This is the first time I've been to England. I arrived last week, invited to King's College, Cambridge, as a Visting Scholar for the next two years. I'm asking myself the questions I always ask when arriving to live in a new country. (As a young academic I've already worked in Ireland, France and Switzerland.) What are these people like, in this culture? What is the *story* they collectively tell about themselves? What are their symbols and rituals? What identity makes them tick?

After the lecture I attend *Evensong* ceremony in King's College Chapel, wearing the black college robes that apparently I must wear. (The butler slithered up to me with a robe over his arm when I went to walk in without one.)

I'm reclining in the ancient polished stalls, tall candles flickering above me. It's fun observing the strangeness of all this, like watching a foreign film. I got my academic training from the pavestone-throwing, left-wing French intellectuals who led the cultural revolution of *Paris 1968* - libertines, poets, revolutionaries, psychoanalysts... The medieval rituals of these academics here seem alien as a dream.

Sitting there admiring the almighty stained-glass windows, I assume that I know my own future. I'll stay just one academic year in this weird place - not two as planned - and move on, like a bird flying through on a long, lazy migration. Go back to work in France, spend a couple of years in the States

and then settle in Ireland, where I grew up. With the arrogance of youth, I do not realise that I don't hold the knowledge of my own future. At that moment, I have no awareness that I am going to spend most of my working life in this, for me, most unlikely of places.

Unlike the refugees in this book, I had made what's called an *economic migration*. I was invited to this country to work because of specialist skills. No traumatic moment swivelled the compass to dictate where I could live my life. In this odd little city that I passed through, opportunities, projects and relationships will just happen to grow like a gossamer web around me until, unexpectedly, it will be more rewarding to stay than to move on.

I sit listening for the first time to the high-pitched otherworldliness of the famous King's College Choir. It's a sound that will punctuate my working days here, marking out several years of blissful immersion in the University's silent, wood-panelled libraries. When they finish, I cross the quadrangle for dinner at High Table, where I am to take my meals. As I go out the Chapel door, a figure in ceremonial garb directs me to walk across the grass because as a Member of High Table I 'have the right to'. He steers everyone else to go the long way round the kerbed edges of the quadrangle. In the Fellows' Lounge, it's dry sherry and hesitating, stilted small-talk before dinner. Then a formal procession in twos walks us ceremonially to High Table to eat. Later, port and snuff travel by us, pushed round the table on a little silver carriage with smooth silver wheels. Apparently you must always push it along from right to left, never the other way. I am relieved to learn the snuff must never stop in front of women. It is for the men.

A dashing young don has been assigned to show me round Cambridge for the evening. He takes me for a drink in a venerable old pub where Nobel scientists have mulled over mathematical dilemmas. Then he announces, flushed: now I'm taking you somewhere *a bit different...* ! After the Paris underworld, I'm ready for anything. Does Cambridge have its own *Moulin Rouge* or red-light district? He leads me across town to an ancient lamp-post that stands half-way across a dark green. He points up at a much-renewed piece of old graffiti on it that says:

## Reality Checkpoint

The arrow points away from us and the university quarter, towards what he explains is the ethnic, working-class part of town. <sup>1</sup> ‘*And that’s where we’re going!*’, he shouts, as if we were on safari, heading out into the Serengeti. On the way, he explains Cambridge’s ancient *Town versus Gown* divide. Although we had hung up our academic gowns in the Fellows’ Vestibule after dinner and come out in civilian garb, apparently we would always be on the *Gown* side of this division.

That night, standing in a pool of light under the lamp-post in the middle of the dark green, no foresight or intuition - no omen in the sky - told me that I’d still be standing in this strange city twenty years later, that I would have become very interested in its *Town-Gown* divide, and would have created this book about it.

---

<sup>1</sup> For those who know Cambridge, this lamp-post known as ‘*Reality Checkpoint*’ - symbolically dividing the territories of *Town* and *Gown* - is in the middle of Parker’s Piece, and the arrow points towards Mill Road.

# Chapter 1

## Ruth

From a mud hut in the African bushlands

*A grilled locust is better than no soup*

Proverb from Ruth's country





## Ruth

### Living in heaven

You know many people say that when you die you can go to heaven. Well I tell you, I *have* died and *I am in heaven!* Because life here in Cambridge is heaven and you all don't even realise it, that you are living in heaven! That is why I wanted to tell my story. To help Cambridge people to realise that.

I will tell you why it is heaven here. Because here you *Buy one, Get one free...!* (doubles over with laughter for a long time). Just imagine that. For instance I work as a cleaner. And here in Cambridge if you get a job as a cleaner and you work hard, you can pay your rent and pay for food and clothing and medicines and the bus, and then you can send money home to your family as well to support them! In my country nowadays, no matter how hard or how long you work you cannot pay for these things - there is no way. It is heaven here in Cambridge because everything is so unbelievably *cheap* compared to in my country!

For example, see this nice warm fleece jacket I'm wearing. It was £4.99 at the supermarket and it was *Buy one, Get one free!* It's unbelievable. Brand new. Can you *imagine* it? (laughs and laughs) In my country there is no way nowadays that any sort of worker can afford to buy a jacket like this, even if he works so hard all week long. Here it's just a small part of your salary - *plus you buy one, get one free!* In the supermarket you just walk in, you get some tins of tomatoes for 40p and it's *Buy one, Get one free!* It's unbelievable. It's like they are giving it all away. In my country no-one can afford a tin of tomatoes anymore, no matter how long they work. A tin of tomatoes has become like a dream. So we are all living in heaven here in Cambridge.

Where I come from, the people, they are dying - actually dying every day, lots and lots of them. Here in Cambridge, elderly people have a pension to live on and nice accommodation and all the food and medicine they need. The government gives them all this if they don't have the money themselves. *They even go free on the bus!* (laughing and laughing) But back

home where I come from - if you came there with me this minute - you would see our elderly people just lying on the ground inside the door of a hut or a concrete room, just lying on the bare ground with nothing - nothing - just waiting to die. They have no way of getting any food, clothes, medicines, nothing.

And so many of our children are Aids orphans now as well. Every time I phone home I am afraid now to ask about the extended family and the neighbours. I used to ask for news about everyone and say *Oh how is Mr. So-and-so and Mrs. So-and-so?* And my family would say *Didn't you know? Oh, he has died, she has died, they have died.* So now I am almost afraid to ask after our friends and neighbours. For instance, our friend has just died of Aids. He had three wives. Two of them have now died of it as well. In that household there were ten children in all. So now the surviving wife is left alone with all ten small orphans and she just cannot feed them. She is not going to be able to feed them. There is no food anywhere. How can she feed them? This is what I hear when I phone home. So you see what I mean about the tin of tomatoes - it just costs a tiny part of my salary as a cleaner, just like that. Plus they give you another tin for free, for no reason.

So we are living in heaven here in Cambridge. I am so lucky because I work at different cleaning jobs at different times during the day. And sometimes I manage to get some extra cleaning work in the evenings too, after my day of work. It's great. Sometimes people ask me why I don't get tired, doing extra work in the evenings on top. But I don't get tired. I can't get tired. God won't let me get tired. God gives me all the energy I need. Because I have to send money home to feed my children, and the neighbours' children as well, because so many are orphans now. So I am very happy to find extra work any time. I can't get tired (smiling).