

The Dinner Invitation by Matt Abbott

Clap-clap clap-clap-clap. Miss Taylor does it first, followed by the whole class. It works a treat, every time.

'OK, everybody - now that I have your attention. As you can see, we have a new starter with us for Year 6.'

Ahmed sat blushing in the centre of the room as everybody turned to look.

Miss Taylor offered him a warm smile, but Ahmed did everything to avoid eye contact.

'Can everybody say Hello Ahmed...?' The newly formed Class 6B did as Miss Taylor asked, and Ahmed longed for her to change the subject.

'Hello, everybody,' he muttered beneath his breath.

He spent his breaktimes reading. Textbooks, mainly, to try and catch up with his work. But sometimes, if his sister Rahmiya had spare pocket money, she'd buy him a Marvel. One day, he thought - if he were seriously lucky - he'd be able to buy himself a mask.

Everybody knew his name immediately. Sometimes they said hello to him as they walked past. But nobody stopped to talk to him or ask him any questions. And he tried his best to remember their names - Tom, and Laura, and Mason. But nothing could stop his mind from going blank or their faces becoming a blur.

He told his parents that he'd made plenty of friends, and that he was planning on joining the football team. They insisted he should invite them over for dinner. But by the Thursday of his first week, he'd only chatted with the lunch ladies.

The last bell on Friday is the opening note of a symphony. As his classmates flood out, Ahmed slowly packs his rucksack. Miss Taylor switches the board off as he shuffles toward the door.

'Hi, Ahmed. Do you fancy walking home...?' Sam, one of the most popular kids in school, smiles and awaits his answer. He tries to find words, but they're all muddled up, and before he knows it, they're walking together.

'I've seen you sat reading through breaktime, and I thought you must be lonely,' starts Sam. 'I don't think I've ever felt lonely before, but my mum says it's rubbish.'

Ahmed allows a little smile. 'I'm getting used to it...'

'But don't you want to make friends...?' asks Sam. 'Making friends is dead easy!'

Ahmed doesn't know what to say. In his last school, he knew absolutely everyone. And in this school, he's too scared to try. All he sees is what makes him different, and at school, that's the worst thing to be.

They catch up with some more pupils from 6B, standing outside the shop. One of them - Charlie - is flicking through a Marvel. Sam heads inside to get a drink from the fridge and leaves Ahmed to stand with the crowd.

'Hi, Ahmed,' says Charlie. 'Do you want to look...?'

'I'm good, thanks.' He grins. 'I've already read it...'

They spend the walk home deciding who'd win between Deadpool and Hulk.

And on Monday morning, with a spring in his step, Ahmed asks Sam round for dinner.

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