

Ali Goes to University

by Chris Rose

Ali couldn't wait until September. Finally, his life was going to change. June had been terrible, with all those school-leaving exams to do. He spent July waiting. The exam results finally arrived in August. He was worried when the envelope with the exam results in it arrived at their house one morning. He didn't think he'd done very well in his exams. He wasn't the most intelligent or studious boy in his school, he knew that. However, it was really important for him to do well. Ali absolutely had to get out of the small town where he lived. He had to do well in his school-leaving exams so that he could go to university and get away from his hometown.

Like many people his age in Britain, for Ali, going to university wasn't a chance to develop his education or to pursue academic interests. No, for Ali, going to university was a chance to get away from his home town and his parents, to meet lots of new people, to stop being a child and become an adult. To become a new and totally different person. The town he lived in was a very small town in the countryside. It had one school and one pub. There were a few shops on the main street. There wasn't anywhere for young people to meet, so they spent time walking up and down the main street. Everybody knew everybody else in his town. There was never anything new, or different, or unusual. It was boring, very, very boring. Ali couldn't wait to leave. The town was too small for him, he thought. He had other ideas. He had big ambitions. He didn't really know what his ideas or ambitions were yet, but he was sure he had them. And when he went to university, he was going to find out what they were.

His hands trembled as he opened the envelope. He took out the letter, and sighed with relief. It was OK. He hadn't done brilliantly, but his grades were good enough. He had got a place at the University of Rummidge. The course started in September.

When he got off the train at the main station in Rummidge, he felt free at last. The whole world was before him, thought. Even though it was only the town of Rummidge. Ali had wanted to go to London to study, but his mother said it was too

far away. He had tried to go to Manchester, but the results of his school-leaving exams weren't good enough, so he had to accept his other choice. Rummidge was a big industrial city in the centre of England. It wasn't a beautiful place, but that didn't matter to Ali. At least it wasn't his hometown. He had only one suitcase with him when he arrived. He didn't want to bring much from home. He wanted to forget his home.



The University was a short distance from the city centre. It was much more attractive than the rest of the city. It was situated in its own campus, which was like a large park with lots of modern buildings in it. Rummidge wasn't the oldest university in Britain, nor the most prestigious, but Ali didn't mind. For him, it was a new world, a new start.

He was staying in the halls of residence. The halls of residence were two tall tower blocks at the edge of the campus. Nearly 1000 students lived here. Some students complained about the halls of residence. They said they were ugly, and that the rooms were too small. They didn't like having to share a bathroom. Ali didn't care though. He thought it was fantastic. He was away from his parents and his hometown. He spent his evenings going to bars and clubs. He spent his days asleep, mostly. He studied as little as possible. He had to do some exams at the end of the year, but that was a long way off yet. He forgot to write letters to his parents. He telephoned them now and then. He didn't worry

too much about his parents. He felt free and independent for the first time in his life.

Being free and independent, however, also meant that Ali had to cook for himself and do his own washing. This was a problem. Up until now, Ali's mum had always cooked for him. Up until now, Ali's mum had always washed his clothes for him. For a while, he got all his food from a local takeaway restaurant. Soon, however, he realised that this was costing him too much money. He wore the same t-shirt for three weeks. Soon, however, he realised that he was starting to smell bad. His problems were solved, however, when Katia appeared.

Katia was a girl with flame-red hair who lived in the same hall of residence as Ali. He had always watched her from a distance. She always dressed completely in black. She always looked a little bit bored. She had friends, but was often on her own. Ali thought she was beautiful. One evening, Ali was in the kitchen all the people who lived on his floor in the hall of residence shared. He was trying to cook pasta. He didn't know what to do. He opened a packet of spaghetti and put it in some water. Then he started to heat the water. He left it there for half an hour. When he tried to eat it, it was disgusting! The spaghetti had turned into soup! Katia walked into the kitchen and Ali tried to hide what he had made. He didn't want to look stupid in front of Katia. He felt embarrassed. He didn't want to look a like a boy from a small town who doesn't even know how to cook spaghetti. It was too late though. Katia saw what he was eating.

"What is that?" she asked, looking disgusted.
"Errm, spaghetti" said Ali, feeling embarrassed.
"I'll show you how to cook spaghetti!" said Katia. She then cooked a delicious simple meal with spaghetti and tomatoes and olives. Ali was amazed. He didn't even know what an olive was.
"Where did you learn to do that?" he asked her.
"Oh, in Italy. My family often go there on holiday." Ali was impressed.
"Wow...have you travelled a lot?"
"Well, yes, I have" said Katia. "Europe of course, we have a house in France. Then South America, India..."

Ali had rarely been outside his hometown. He had been to London once. That was the furthest he had ever travelled.

Ali and Katia started to meet quite often. Ali always made sure he was in the kitchen when Katia was around. Quite often she cooked for him, or showed him how to cook. He made sure he washed his clothes regularly. He wanted to impress her. He was never sure if she was impressed though. She always looked bored. According to Katia, everything was boring. Her course was boring. The other students were boring. This university was boring. Rummidge was boring.

Ali was so impressed by Katia that he started to imitate her. He pretended that he was bored with everything too. He didn't realise that a lot of other people thought that Katia was arrogant. He didn't care. He was free and independent and in love for the first time in his life. He started to miss a lot of his lectures and classes. He forgot to write the essays and do the assignments he had to do. Eventually his tutor called Ali into his office. "Listen, Ali" said his tutor. "If you don't start working harder, you will fail your first year." Ali wasn't that worried though. He could catch up on the essays, and he was sure that if he studied a bit before the end of year exams he would pass them. He may not get great grades, but it would be OK.

One day, there was a knock on the door of his room. He woke up and looked at his clock. It was 12 midday. He had slept until 12. He got up and opened the door. He hoped it would be Katia. But it wasn't Katia. It was Femi. Femi was another girl who was doing the same course as Ali. She was from Africa. She was one of several overseas students on his course. He hadn't spoken to her much.

"Have I just woken you up?" asked Femi.
"Errr, yeah" said Ali, pretending to try and look bored.
"You've been missing a lot of classes recently."
"So what?" said Ali. "They're boring. Everything's boring."
"Why don't you go back home, then?" asked Femi.
"Home's boring too" said Ali.

"I'd love to be able to go home", said Femi. "But I love it here too. I'm lucky to be here. You don't know how lucky you are." Femi sat down and began to tell Ali her story. She had been the brightest, most intelligent girl in her class at school, and she had hoped to be able to go to

university. However, she was from a small town, her parents were not rich, and it was very unlikely that she would be able to follow her dream and go on to study at university. When she finished school, she would have to find a job and work until she got married. That was the way things worked in her country. But she had not given up, she had continued to study, and eventually she won a grant to be able to come and study in the UK.

“I love it here. I love the freedom and independence you have. I never get bored for one minute. But I miss my home a lot. I miss my parents and my family and my old friends.”

Ali didn't say anything while Femi told him her story. But he was listening very carefully, even if he was pretending to look bored. Katia had a lot of interesting stories, she had done lots of interesting things, but she didn't seem to realise how much these things meant. Femi had a whole different kind of experience. The life that Femi had had up until now, and the experiences that she had in her home town were so much more profound than anything Katia had done.

“When I finish my degree, I hope to be able to do a Masters degree. Then I'm going to go back home. When I go back home I'm going to be a teacher. I want to be able to make a difference in my country. Yes, it might be boring compared to here. But I think about all those people who haven't been as lucky as I was. I think about the people who don't have a chance to get out. And I know that if I don't do something, it will always stay that way.”

Femi's story affected Ali a lot. He didn't know why he hadn't spoken to her before, and felt a bit ashamed and embarrassed about his ignorance.

He wanted to tell Katia about Femi and her story. He went over to her room, but she wasn't in.

In fact, he didn't see Katia for a long time after that. One of her friends told him that she had gone back to her parents so she could study more and concentrate better for her exams at the end of the year. Katia had never given Ali her parents' phone number. She hadn't even told him exactly where she lived. Katia didn't call him, or even e-mail him. He didn't see her again until June, when they did the exams. He ran over to her as soon as he saw her.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, sorry...I should have told you. I went back to my parents for a bit...” She yawned and looked bored. “I guess I should have called you. Sorry.”

“Listen”, said Ali, “I'm not going back home this summer after the exams. I think I'll stay here. Or I might go travelling somewhere. Why don't you come with me?”

“Thanks for the offer, Ali, but I have to go to France, stay with my parents. It'll be boring.”

Ali walked away from her. He was surprised with himself. He was surprised that he wasn't disappointed. He was surprised that he wasn't really that bothered at all. He realised now how superficial Katia was. How lucky she was, and how little she understood how lucky she was.

Ali didn't really know what to do after the exams. He hoped he was going to pass them. Perhaps he could go to Africa. He could perhaps meet up with Femi there. Or perhaps he could go back home. He could go back to his boring, little home town, and he could try to make a difference there.