

Ysenda Maxtone Graham extract from *Big School* for Tomorrowsbooks.

‘Welcome to Schola Magna,’ said a deep voice from the loudspeaker in the corner of the carriage, ‘and a big welcome to our 11,000 new boys and girls. This train is for Grand Central. Please change on to the Shakespeare Line at Grand Central and make your way to Assembly Stadium, where our start-of-term assembly will begin at 9.15.’

The train sped on through the tunnel. It was so dark out there that the train windows became mirrors, reflecting carriage after carriage of pupils in red blazers. Danny tried to guess what places they were underneath: now, perhaps, the leafy suburbs with their semi-detached houses like his own, now the more built-up bit towards the centre of the city, with terraced houses and estate agents, now the river, now the area near the cathedral, now...

‘Grand Central. Grand Central. All change, please.’

Following the crowd, he walked on to a long up-escalator, and emerged into a glorious railway station with a domed glass ceiling. After the darkness of the underground tunnel, the light was dazzling. The huge dome was at ground-floor level: if you looked out, you could see business men in the ordinary world walking across the park to their offices. They could see the people inside the dome, but there was no way for them to get in.

From all four corners of the city, pupils in their hundreds, in their thousands, came up the escalators into the great central domed forum of the station. How many escalators were there? Four, eight, twelve, sixteen...Danny lost count.

There was no need to ask the way. He felt himself being sucked on to a downward escalator, with advertisements in a diagonal line all the way

down. 'Spice up your lunch hour at the Masala Parlour. Alight at Delhi West and turn first left.'

At the bottom there were two signs: 'Geography Line' with an arrow pointing to the left, and 'Shakespeare Line northbound' with an arrow pointing to the right. Everyone turned right. 'This way, dears,' said a young, blonde-haired Florence on the platform. 'And I'll have none of that pushing, please. Are you all right, ducky?' she said to Danny. 'It's quite a lot to take in on your first day. I bet your last school was smaller than this one.'

Danny nodded. Before he knew it, he was on another train, this time speeding northwards. How many miles from home was he now? Five? Six? There was no room to sit down: he had to stand and hold on to a pole next to a boy with smelly armpits. At last the train emerged into daylight.

'Assembly Stadium. Assembly Stadium. Please check you have all your belongings with you. The start-of-term assembly will begin in nine minutes.'

Emerging into the fresh air, Danny looked up and saw the back of what looked like a gigantic football stadium. Round the outside there were stalls selling school scarves, souvenir school magazines, hot bacon rolls, badges and flags. He could hear the roaring and cheering of crowds.

A policeman with a loudhailer was giving instructions. 'There are twelve entrances to the stadium. Please enter according to your birthday month.'

In front of him was an entrance with the word 'JULY' above it. Pupils were clanking through the turnstiles. September must be two gates along. Danny joined the queue, touched his card and tapped his birth-time on to the

blue dot, pushed through the turnstile and climbed the stairs high into the stands.

‘You can sit next to me if you like,’ said a tall boy in front of him.
‘You get a good view from up here. I’m Seb. 19th September, fourth year.
What are you?’

‘Well, my birthday’s on the 27th. My name’s Danny. I’m new.’

He looked around him and gasped. The stadium he was sitting in was even bigger than the World Cup Final stadium he’d seen on TV. (He’d never been allowed to go to a football stadium himself, of course.) Seventy-seven thousand pupils! It was incredible! If Miss Cathy could see him now! And those little kids he used to play football with at St Mary’s Junior – they had something to look forward to if they lived inside the Ring Road!

All around him, crowds of pupils were chanting and waving scarves and flags. A boy in front of him was pounding a bicycle horn to the rhythmic chanting of ‘SEP-TEM-BER!’ Far away on the opposite side of the stadium, the March and April crowds were doing a Mexican wave.

‘Look up,’ said Seb.

High in the sky, Danny saw four red dots. They grew larger and larger as they came down towards the earth. Parachutes! Each one had a white letter on it: ‘M’, then ‘A’, then ‘G’, then ‘S’. Elegantly, they landed in the middle of the pitch. The parachutists unstrapped themselves and took a bow. The crowds chanted: ‘There’s only one Schola Magna! Only one!’

‘Who were those people?’ Danny asked.

‘Oh, they’re the Dangerous Sports Club. Completely bonkers, most of them – but they never seem to be short of recruits. They’re the warm-up act before proper assembly starts.’

The Dangerous Sports boys made their exit to loud applause. And then, to Danny's amazement, the clapping and cheering grew even louder.

'What's happening now?' Danny asked.

'The teachers are about to come out,' Seb explained.

So much excitement – for teachers? Danny couldn't imagine crowds chanting and cheering when Miss Cathy arrived at St Mary's Junior in her Ford Fiesta.

And sure enough, the teachers emerged jogging from the tunnel – just like the football teams at the beginning of a match. Except these people didn't look at all like football players. Some of them were balding old professors in gowns, some were ginger-headed men in tweed suits who looked as if they didn't get much fresh air, some were plump ladies in flowery dresses, some were pretty younger teachers in short skirts (you could hear whistles when they came on), and some were young trendy male teachers in T-shirts and track-suit trousers. A few of the younger, trendy ones punched the air as if they'd just scored a goal. All the teachers made their way on to the middle of the pitch.

A fanfare of trumpets sounded. Only then did Danny notice that at each end of the stadium, high up under the oval metallic roof, there were two giant screens. These were now switched on. They flickered for a moment, and then showed the face of a very old man.

'Who's he?' Danny whispered.

'The headmaster, Dr Harding,' Seb whispered back. 'He's ancient. He doesn't live at the school any more. He lives in the Retreat Village. This is how he speaks to us – on these screens. Listen. He's going to welcome us all.'

But Dr Harding's speech did not come out as Seb, or any of the pupils at the school, expected.

'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,' said Dr Harding, 'I am making this broadcast, not on the first day of term as you might imagine, but on the 10th August, just over a month earlier.

'You see before you a very frail old man. One who has devoted the latter part of his life to making Schola Magna the biggest and the best school in the world. The reason why I am speaking to you in the middle of the holidays is that tomorrow I am due to go into hospital for a heart operation. All may be well: I may emerge healthy and invigorated, and live to be your headmaster for years to come. On the other hand' – and here he paused to lift a glass of water to his lips with a shaky hand – 'on the other hand, I might not. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.

'So I just want to say to you, beloved members of Schola Magna – thank you for making this school a shining beacon of excellence and delight. If, by any chance, I do not recover from the operation, I leave the school in the capable, the loving, the reliable hands of Dr Cranmer, whom many of you know as a much-loved history master and master in charge of the Imaginary Map Club. I bid you goodbye – but hope it is only "au revoir".'

The screen went black. Then, it flickered again, and a slightly younger man's face appeared on the screen. It was a handsome, chiselled, rosy-cheeked face – and Danny looked down at the pitch and spotted the man whose face it was. He was standing in the middle of the teachers' platform, speaking into a microphone.

'Good morning, everyone.'

'Good morning, Dr Cranmer.'

‘May I say what a delight it is to see you all gathered inside Assembly Stadium again – and a warm welcome to the First Years, all eleven thousand of you. But I must inform you, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, that Dr Harding, very sadly indeed, did not recover from his heart operation. He died the next day, on the 10th August, peacefully, surrounded by his family. I’m sure many of you will miss him deeply. So, what he spoke of has come to pass: I shall take over the reins as your headmaster. And I promise to uphold the splendid values and traditions which make Mags the school it is. Let us hold a two minutes’ silence, in which we will all remember Dr Harding and pray that he may rest in peace.’

It was weird to be among seventy-seven thousand people, but to hear nothing but a deep silence and the occasional muffled sob. Danny was caught up in the atmosphere of shock and mourning which had taken over from the carnival atmosphere of a few minutes ago. The 10th August! His letter from Dr Harding had been dated the 9th. So that treasured letter, admitting Danny to Mags, must have been one of the last things Dr Harding wrote.

‘And so,’ said Dr Cranmer, bringing the silence to an end, ‘a new era begins. Let us be full of hope. And on a more cheerful note, the Seventh Years will be pleased to learn that the loop-the-loop on the Prime Line has now been mended and will be working again this term. It was one of Dr Harding’s special projects, and he would be the first to applaud. I’m proud, also, to announce that we have thirty-four new school clubs, including the Italian Ice-Cream-Tasting Club, the Shetland Pony Club, and a better-than-ever 55-a-Side Football Club. And now we will sing our school hymn, number 219: ‘Ten thousand times ten thousand.’

As Danny tried to master the tune, his mind was racing. Would everything really be all right without Dr Harding in charge? And, more pressingly, would he ever find his way to the first lesson?

‘All Septembers – collect your timetables here,’ said a Florence at the Stadium entrance as Dhruv pushed his way out through the turnstile. Here we go again, he thought. Crowds and more crowds. What would he have to queue up for next?

‘Which is your birthday, dear?’ the Florence asked.

‘The 27th,’ said Dhruv. ‘I’m a new boy.’

‘Here’s your timetable, then, love,’ she said. ‘You’re in the 27th September form, Year 1, and your first lesson is’ – she consulted the timetable – ‘history. Oh, and you’ve got the lovely Dr Cranmer himself. That’s a nice start. Down the Assembly Line to Grand Central, change on to the History Line eastbound and go ten stops to Hardicanute. Then go up to Dr Cranmer’s classroom in the lift. Turn over that timetable, dearie, and you’ll find the Schola map on the back. You won’t get lost if you keep that on you.’

Dhruv turned the timetable over, and gazed at the map before his eyes. He had always loved maps. The crumpled map of northern India by his bed was his favourite bedtime reading. When he wasn’t playing Simpsons at home, he was browsing on a website called MasterAtlas, checking the distance from Albuquerque to Alice Springs, or Addis Ababa to Atlanta. (There were so many places in the world beginning with ‘A’, he hadn’t yet reached the ‘B’s’.)

This Schola map gave him the first tingle of real pleasure he had felt since arriving from India. All the different-coloured lines connecting and diverging... his own station, East Lea, far in the east...and those ones called Delhi Central and Delhi West...what were they like? Would he be allowed to explore?

He carried on gazing at the map, standing motionless as the crowds overtook him. 'I will go to every station on the map and tick them off in a notebook,' he vowed to himself. Then the Florence nudged him gently on the shoulder and said, 'You'd better hop on to one of those trains, dear, or you'll be late for your first lesson.'

With the map's help, Dhruv changed on to the orange History Line at Grand Central. It was crowded (of course). All the people on it, from First Years to Seventh Years, must be going to history lessons. 'This is a History Line train,' said a voice from the loudspeaker. 'Please would you listen to the following item of Mag Knowlia, and follow the words on the screen.'

*Willy, Willy, Harry, Stee,
Harry, Richard, John, Harry Three.
One, two, three Neds, Dicky Two,
Harry four, five, six, then who?*

'Thank you for your attention. That is our Mag Knowlia for today. We hope you enjoy your journey.'

'Please can you tell me who those people are?' Dhruv asked an older girl who was sitting opposite him. 'Willy, Willy and all the others? Are they some of the pupils on the History Line?'

‘No, they’re the Kings and Queens of England from 1066, der-brain.’ She made the ‘der’ noise sound so mentally retarded that Dhruv didn’t dare ask the next question, ‘and what’s magnolia? I thought it was a kind of tree.’

The train arrived at Hardicanute. Dhruv stepped out and squeezed into a crowded lift. Dr Cranmer’s name was next to ‘6th floor’. Up the lift went. He arrived, with a trickle of other pupils, in a bright, high-up classroom with a view down to the street below.

‘Welcome, 27th Septembers,’ said a man behind the teacher’s desk. He had grey hair, rosy cheeks and a kind face. Dhruv recognised him as Dr Cranmer, the new headmaster, who had spoken in Assembly. ‘Now, you are...?’

‘Dhruv Singh.’

‘Ah, yes, here’s your name badge. Would you be so good as to pin it to your blazer? Now, let me see, when exactly were you born?’ He consulted a chart. ‘Ah, yes, 11.44pm. You’re one of the younger ones, so I’ve put you near the front.’

Dhruv sat down and looked out of the window at the buildings across the street. Were they part of the school, too, or were they the ordinary town? Then he looked across at the boy next to him. He was a tall, dark-haired boy who looked amazingly relaxed. He was sitting in the cool teenager way with his legs apart, tapping his feet and fingers to the music playing in his head, and studying the Schola map. Dhruv peered at his name badge. It said

‘Danny Dickens’.

‘Oh, hi, there,’ the boy said. ‘Which station did you get on at?’

‘East Lea,’ said Dhruv. It’s far away to the east, beyond White Quays. And you?’

‘Meadowdown. Way out west. It’s fantastic, isn’t it?’

Dr Cranmer tapped his ruler on the desk. ‘Quiet please, 27th Septembers. I think we are all assembled. Now, would you please take a look around you? Every other pupil you can see in this room was born on exactly the same day as you, ten years, eleven months and twelve days ago. Can you believe it? Now, some people would say that, being Libras, you should all have the same character and tendencies. But I tend to dispute this theory. Time will tell.

‘Now, I hope you enjoyed the nugget of history on the train this morning. Indeed, I think we will start this term with the Battle of Hastings, when the first “Willy”, William I, began his reign. But before we begin our story, would you like me to tell you a bit about the history of Schola Magna? Yes, I thought so.’

A boy at the back made a loud snoring noise.

‘Hello, back there,’ said Dr Cranmer. ‘Are you having trouble with your nasal passage? Poor you.’

Dhruv looked behind him – everyone in the class looked behind them – and saw the boy grinning and running his hands through his long hair.

‘Well,’ continued Dr Cranmer, ‘sleep if you must, and I’ll tell the story to those who are interested. Are you sitting comfortably?’

‘It all began when your parents were a little older than you are now. It was a terrible time for schools. Each one was set against its neighbour. There was a lot of nonsense about which school attained the “best” results. Ridiculous lists were published, announcing which schools achieved the

most and the fewest 'A' grades. So all anyone thought about was exams, exams, exams. Children from rival schools were stealing each other's school caps and getting into fights. Teachers were being sacked all the time, or poached. A dreadful time. And every little school was trying to raise money for its own swimming-pool, which of course none of them could afford.

'And then three of us – Reggie Beddington, Oswald Harding and I – had the idea of turning all the schools into one enormous school. Then you could have the best of everything. Three Olympic-sized pools, with diving-boards and slides! A football stadium for school matches and Assembly! A thousand school clubs, to suit every taste! An enormous orchestra, jazz bands and rock bands! A school photograph as long as the Bayeux Tapestry! Not only school plays, but a school film! An infinite variety of pupils! Imagine how it was in the bad old days: think of a boy in the south of the city who could identify every bird that had migrated from Africa. How was he to meet the boy in the northern part of the city, who had precisely the same knowledge? It would never have happened – but for the Great Amalgamation. Those two boys, as it happens, have just finished university and they're making a television programme together.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a girl at the opposite wall from Dhruv, 'but how many pupils are there in the school?'

'The current number,' answered Dr Cranmer, 'is seventy-seven thousand, two hundred and eighty-three. In each year, there are 365 forms – one for every birthday of the year. The 29th February class, of course, only occurs once every four years. Poor 29th Februarys, they only get one or two birthdays in their whole time here. And, as you'll soon discover, birthdays

at this school are very special indeed. You might think it would be no fun to have the same birthday as everyone else in your class. It's true, you won't be the centre of attention. But there will be other delights in store. Any more questions?'

'Could you tell us about the trains, sir?' asked a boy in glasses behind Dhruv.

'Ah, the trains,' said Dr Cranmer. 'Aren't they splendid? But it wasn't trains at first. Oh, no. Reggie Beddington was the first headmaster, and his great thing was buses. Bendi-buses, double-deckers, single-deckers, open-topped: between lessons everyone had to wait at bus-stops and hop on. But Reggie hadn't thought it out properly. The traffic jams were appalling. One bus got so stuck going to Geography that it didn't arrive till break-time the next day. The parents complained, of course. It all got a bit too much for poor old Reggie. He retired. When Dr Harding took over as headmaster he immediately decided to build an underground railway, and we designed it together. Much better. Last year, only seven trains were late by more than thirty seconds – and one of those was because Harry Watkins in the 17th June pulled the communication cord. Now, there's just time for one more question before we get on with the Battle of Hastings, which, incidentally, took place on the 14th October, just seventeen days after your birthdays. Yes, you with the freckles?'

'How fast do the trains go, sir?'

'Good question! We're always improving on our speeds. We aim for one minute between stations. It's now possible to go from Grand Central to Siberia in 7 minutes and 33 seconds at an average speed of 68.6 miles per hour. Not bad, don't you agree? And I hope you admired the screens in

your carriage, which enable you to be entertained and educated as you dash from lesson to lesson. You'll pick up some extremely useful bits of knowledge – Mag Knowlia, we call it, spelled with a 'K', not like the tree – as you travel along the different lines. We have Mag Knowlia instead of homework. We don't believe in homework – another dreadful scourge of the bad old days. Homework ruins weekday evenings, damages relationships between parents and children, and completely puts children off learning. Whereas Mag Knowlia whets the appetite.'

No homework! Dhruv looked across at Danny and caught his eye. Both boys smiled at each other. Dhruv copied Danny's thumbs-up sign.

'Oh, my goodness,' said Dr Cranmer, 'ten fifty-three already. And we haven't even started on William of Normandy. Now, has anyone here been to a place called Stamford Bridge? No, not the football ground: the battle ground, in Yorkshire. September 25th, 1066. Saxons v. Norwegians. Would you like to know who won?'

A few minutes later, loud chords sang out along the corridor. 'I'm afraid that's the end-of-lesson music,' said Dr Cranmer. 'Last few bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. On you go to your next lesson. I believe you have English now, with the charming Miss Peach. Back to Grand Central, change on to the Shakespeare Line, and go all the way to Birnam Wood. Your last lesson before lunch, I must tell you, is Science, at Bunsen Square, and I must warn you that Dr Roach, the Senior Master, is a bit of a stickler for punctuality.'