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The Best Non-Crier on Purley Avenue

I hate Dolores. She has so many freckles. Her face looks like a slice of ham with many tomato seeds. And she has breasts. I don't have breasts yet but I have a great BMX bike that I call Tiger.

"You're just a stupid Cabbage Patch kid," I yell at her from across the street.

"And our gang will always be better than yours."

With that, I run to the green bush where the rest of my gang is waiting. We call ourselves The Stars. It's in the middle of the hot summer of 1986 and we always hang out together.

"So what's the plan for today? Where's Happy Sam? And where are Punch and Judy?"

Happy Sam is my neighbor from Nigeria, five years old. He was born in 1981 and is younger than all of us. But we all like Happy Sam because he is just so happy. Punch and Judy, the nickname for the Kenyan twins, are my best friends on Purley Avenue. They are the fastest runners in our school but I'm better than them at marbles.

Justin tells us that Happy Sam went to pick up his brothers and sisters from the airport with his parents. His family comes to London every summer from Nigeria. Justin is Julie and Jackson's brother. They are Ugandan like me and they are called The Musokes. When our white friends read their name, they call them Moo-Soaks.

"Well, we have to go and get them. Come on: if our gang is going to be strong, then all the members have to be here. We are going to rumble, and we will win."

"Listen guys, I think we have to go over to their house and tell them that if they don't come today, we can lose the rumble," I declare.

"Rachel's right," Julie agrees.

I know she only does so because she thinks that Richard will like her better. Richard is my big brother and he says Julie is his girlfriend. Julie even allows Richard to touch her breasts. I don't have breasts yet. I don't even want them.

"Ok then, let's go," says Richard.

"Good."

When we get to Punch and Judy's house, we see a big moving van outside.

"What's going on?" Justin asks aloud.

"Are they leaving?" echoes Richard.

Their Mum, Mrs. Why-Nigh-Nah, which is actually spelt Wainaina, comes rushing out with about a dozen pillows in front of her and bumps into us.

"Where are you guys going? Are you leaving?" I blurt out, leaving Julie to help her with the pillows that have fallen on the ground.

"Oh, you're all here," says Mrs. Why-Nigh-Nah.

I hate it when adults play dumb.

"Have you come to see us off?" she asks.

"Off?" but where are you going?" Jackson asks.

"Didn't the twins tell you? We have to go back to Kenya. We have been in Eggs-eye-L for too long and we think it's time the twins got to know their country.

All I am thinking is, what is Eggs-eye-L? I think it means people who have lived in England for long. Maybe that means me and Richard are in Eggs-eye-L as well. I have to ask Mum. And if the twins wanted to know their country, they could have asked me because I'm better than they are in Geography. I know that there's Uganda next to it, that's where me, Richard, Justin, Jackson and Julie come from. And then there's Zaire, next to Uganda, which is the biggest country in Africa and many years ago a Belgian King called Leopard 2, ruled there for many years. And then Kenya is next to a big big sea, called the Indian Ocean, much bigger than the River Thames. Many years ago Indians used to go and work there and they liked the place so much that they stayed. That is why in Kenya near that big sea, there are many people who look like Indians.

"You see, their Dad left last week to get our house ready. President Moi called him back to give him a job in the Government."

Moi is not pronounced in the French way but it is like Toy with an M.

"I thought Kenya had a King and many chiefs," I cry out.

Mrs. Why-Nigh-Nah laughed.

"Can we say bye to Punch and Judy now? Where are they?" asks Justin.

The twins come out at that point wearing baseball caps and similar T-shirts.

"You're my best friends, why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" I ask.

"We just got to know last week and then dad left and we were all rushing here and there. But when we leave, then you will be the fastest runner in the school," Punch says, trying to comfort me.

The thought of that makes me smile. There is a lump rising in my throat but I can't cry. Everyone knows that I am the best non-crier on Purley Avenue. I'm even better than Richard because he cried yesterday when dad caned him. I don't know why dad does that because I think it's against the law.

"The Stars rule," Jackson says and gives Punch and Judy a big mannish hug.

"They rule," I respond, and then we all gave each other a group hug.

Waving at the twins as they drive from Purley Avenue possibly forever, I can't even imagine what The Stars will do without them.

I sit opposite Richard waiting for Mum to finish slicing our sandwiches. Dad is reading The Guardian. Today is Friday and they both have a half day of work.

"Mum, what's Eggs-eye-L?" I ask my Mum as she places the ham sandwiches in front of us.

"Oh, you mean exile? Well, why are you asking dear?" she responds, avoiding an answer.

"Coz Punch and Judy and their Mum are going back to Kenya today and Mrs. Why-Nigh-Nah said they were in exile."

Mum and Dad look at each other until Dad answers.

"Exile is when people have to leave their home country for a while because it is not safe."

"Does that mean we are also in exile, then?" Now I want to know more.

"Why don't you finish up your lunch?"

Whenever Dad says that, I know he doesn't want to tell me anything more.

I gobble down my sandwiches and wash them down with milkshake.

"Dad, today we have a rumble with the cabbage patch kids. Here, look at our new tattoos," I proudly show him.

He can't hide his smile even when he says, "I don't like those rough games that you play. Why don't you spend more time in the kitchen with your mother and learn how to cook?"

"Oh, wait, your cousins are coming from Uganda to spend a few weeks with us," Mum shouts at us. "So you need to set up the spare room and clean up the messes in your own rooms."

"Mum, how can you tell me this now just before a rumble? This is going to be our biggest fight ever. Oh never mind. Bye."

The others are already there by the bush. Jackson and Justin have their skateboards and Julie is on her roller skates.

"The Stars rule."

"They rule."

Jackson does the honour of placing our flag on top of the bush.

"I hear them coming," Justin announces.

We immediately take position.

Richard stays near the bush with some water guns. There is also a hosepipe in case we need it. Justin and Jackson are behind two parked cars. Julie hides behind the tulips and I am in the center of the pavement with Tiger. I see the cabbage patch kids coming towards us. They look like a small army.

Dolores leads them. She yells from a few meters away.

"Count to ten and when we have our positions, I will blow the whistle and the rumble can begin. We all know the rules. Start counting."

I begin to count. My grip is firm on the handlebars of my bike. "You better not let me down Tiger," I mumble under my breath. By the time I

reach to 5, the other gang members have all taken their position. At ten, we begin to rumble.

Jackson and Justin leap onto the bonnets of the parked cars and skate fast down the street. Two of the cabbage patch kids head straight for them on skates but Jackson manages to spray one of them from his water gun right up her skirt. I have no idea what's wrong with these kids and their silly skirts. Dolores is on her skates and she comes at me with her hands full.

Two more cabbage patch kids on bikes come towards me out of nowhere. Jackson knocks one off his bike and they tumble on the ground. I find myself trapped as a cabbage patch kid sticks a twig in the spokes of my bike. I can't move, so flinging Tiger down, I just head butt him in his stomach and we both crash to the floor. He pokes a gun in my chest which hurts and then squirts at me, making water drip right down my legs. The poking really hurts.

"So what's the next plan?" Justin pants from behind me.

Before I can answer, I hear Happy Sam's voice, "Hi guys."

"Hi Sam."

He comes towards us dressed in leg warmers and a new T-shirt with a map of Africa on it.

"We've just got back from the airport with my brothers and sisters. Are you guys still rumbling? Can I join?" he asks.

"Of course. Grab a water gun. Why don't you climb up that tree and hide in the leaves like you always do and shoot them down when they come? You know none of them will climb up there in their skates and besides, they are too heavy. If they try, they will just fall off the tree."

Sam is happy to join us.

Sure enough, the cabbage patch kids come back to attack us, but not before Happy Sam happily squirts at them from his massive water gun and then uses his catapult to shoot black berries at them. It is such a sight. I get onto Tiger with a loaded water gun and ride towards Dolores. She is not bothered by this and I soon see why. Just behind me is another cabbage patch kid who throws an empty bucket over my head so I can't see. In trying to get it off, I fall to the ground and a thousand hands start to knock my head while it is still inside the bucket. The sound is like a group of drunk horses playing in my head. It is stuffy in the bucket and the fact that I can feel the cabbage patch kids squishing red berries onto my legs doesn't help. I am trying to tell them to let go but my voice sounds like a dying horn of a car.

"Stop!"

I know the voice isn't mine even though I have been yelling at them to stop. Someone lifts the bucket off my head and I have to squint at the many freckles staring down at me.

"Rachel is bleeding," Dolores announces.

"What? No, I'm not. You guys pelted me with red berries and now I have to soak myself in the bathtub."

"No," says Dolores. "You're bleeding."

"I know what that blood is because it happened to me as well. Go home so that your Mum can clean you up," she says.

In my head, I can still hear the sound of the drunken horses. I feel the back of my shorts. They are wet. Turning round, I see a bright red patch.

It's Dolores that starts the chant.

"Rachel's a woman, w-o-m-a-n."

"Rachel's a woman, w-o-m-a-n."

And then the other kids pick it up too.

"I'm not a woman," I shout. "I'm not."

"Rachel's a woman, w-o-m-a-n."

"I'm not!" This time I feel a tear pricking my eyelid but I can't cry because I'm the best non-crier on Purley Avenue.

"I'm not a woman!" this time shouting louder.

"Rachel's a woman, w-o-m-a-n," the chanting continues until Richard stops it.

"I'm taking Rachel home guys. This was a great rumble. Let's all meet tomorrow morning." Richard takes command and leads me home. Julie follows behind us with Tiger. One by one, they all walk off.

"Mum," Richard yells as we enter the house.

"In the kitchen!" Mum yells back.

"Come here now. An emergency." Richard responds.

"You'll be okay sis," he says, rubbing my head.

"What is going on here?" Mum asks, on seeing me dripping with red juice all over my legs and my hair looking like black bolts of lightning.

"What happened to you?"

"Mum, don't embarrass me but do you remember when we talked about that bleeding thing. Well, it's happened."

Almost carrying me to my room, Mum carefully takes off my clothes and tells me to sit in the bathtub until she comes. In a few seconds, she is back with a packet of pads. I already know how to use them because me and the girls at school have tried them on a number of times. I just feel like I'm not ready yet.

"Mum, even though I've started bleeding, will I still be able to ride Tiger? If not, then I'll go to the doctor so that the bleeding never comes back."

I watch my Mum try and hide a smile and I don't know what she's even smiling about. I don't even know how I'm feeling now. I want to crawl under my bed and stay there and not talk to anyone. I don't even know if I'll ever be able to rumble again because what if the bleeding begins and Dolores starts her stupid chants again. At school, the teacher said that after we bleed, we can even have children. Who wants children? Not me. I'll just adopt some homeless kids. My Mum runs water down my body and I watch the bathtub turning red and pink. It's disgusting. Can that blood really all be mine? My back aches a little, like tiny ants are crawling all over it. Mum cleans me with a sponge and my eyes are bursting with tears but I can't cry because I'm the best non-crier on Purley Avenue.

"It's okay Rachel. After this, you take a nap and I'll bring you some lemonade. You can even take your supper in your room."

After helping me on with a fresh pad which I already knew how to put on, I dress up in clean clothes and go to my room. Just because I wanted to cry, it doesn't mean I'm not the best non-crier on Purley Avenue. I still am.

The morning arrives so quickly. Richard is knocking on my door.

"Come in."

"Hi sis, are you still sick?"

"No, I'm not sick," I reply, even though I still want to lie in bed and sip lemonade.

"Well good because Dad says that we are going to Heathrow to pick up our cousins," says Richard.

"We've never even met these cousins or seen photos of them. Do we have to go?" I whine.

"Well, maybe you don't but Dad says I have to give them a proper welcome to England. It's their first time out of Uganda, explains Richard.

"Richard, do you think they're in exile?" I inquire.

"Richard. Come down now, we're late." We hear Dad calling from downstairs.

"Okay sis, see you later. Mum says that they will both sleep in the spare room even though they are brother and sister. That's so weird but I got to run now. Bye, wish me luck."

I watch Richard run out of my room and hear him stomping down the stairs. My legs feel like they are stuck together with paper glue. I throw off my sheets and let out a gasp. There is a bright red patch on my sheets. It's as if the cabbage patch kids came and squashed their berries during the night. My pajamas are soaked. Did I bleed the whole night? I get out of bed slowly rolling the sheets and my pjs into a ball. Taking a quick shower, I put on a pad and ignore my Mum when she calls. I have to get these into the shower before anyone sees them.

"Hi Mum, just cleaning up a bit," I yell.

When she goes to our cousins' room, I throw the sheets and pjs into the washing machine and turn it on. Over breakfast, I ask my Mum what our cousins are like and she says that the girl who is called Na-car-wear-sah, which is spelt Nakaweesa, is twelve and the boy, Wah-loo-seem-bee, spelt Walusimbi, is thirteen. Their names come from *effumbe* clan. A clan is like a group of people who have the same names and dad said that people in the same clan can't marry one another. Cool! It is my cousins' first time out of Uganda and they will be here for about a month.

"So are they in their summer holidays as well?" I ask.

"Uganda does not have summer, it is just a rainy season and hot season. When they are here, just be nice and include them in your games."

I go up to my lookout point which is in my bedroom from the corner of the window. There, I can see everyone that comes in. From a distance, I see Dad's car. I stay there until he parks and watch as everyone gets out. Richard comes out first carrying two bags and then a girl who has such a

huge butt walks out. She must be Na-car-wear-sah, my girl cousin. She is wearing a green and brown skirt and blouse that match and her hair is in braids with beads. She looks awful, like a woman. I wonder if she has started her bleeding yet. I can't really see Wah-loo-seem-bee very well. My Mum comes out of the house to greet them and Na-car-wear-sah does the strangest thing. She kneels down right there on the gravel. Does she think my Mum is a Queen? Goodness me. I can't hear what they are saying but the greeting takes such a long time and I know it must be in the Ugandan language where they go on for ages instead of just saying hi. They all get into the house right into the living room and I don't know what to do.

Running down two stairs at a time, I barge into the living room where my cousins are taking a drink and some cake. Na-car-wear-sah stares at my legs. I wonder if there is blood on them. She gets up from her seat and I see her getting on her knees. Does she think I'm a Queen too? Taking a step back, I notice Wah-loo-seem-bee for the first time. I open my mouth wide and back out of the room running to my dad.

"Daddy, why is Wah-loo-seem-bee white? He is white. He's white with freckles like those cabbage patch kids."

"Calm down Rachel. Your cousin is an albino. He was born that way but just because his skin is not like ours, he is like us in every way. Now, go and be nice to them." Dad's explanation is not enough. How will my cousin be able to join the Stars if he looks like the cabbage patch kids?

I go back to the living room and the first thing I ask is, "So are you guys in exile?"

Wah-loo-seem-bee gets up and gives me a hug. I can't hug him back.

"Hello Re-cho, it's nice to see you at last," he says.

"Thanks, but my name's Rachel, not Re-cho."

Na-car-wear-sah is still staring at my legs.

"Hi," I greet her, holding out my hand.

"Hello."

"So, would you like to see my room?"

"Okay", Na-Car-wear sah says.

She stacks the plates and glasses together and takes them to the kitchen first and I follow her curiously, not interrupting as she begins to wash and rinse.

"Thank you," my Mum says, and then adds a few other words in the Ugandan language, giving me a sideways glance.

"Let's go up to my room."

Na-car-wear-sah follows me up the stairs.

"You sleep alone in this room?" she asks.

"Yes, every girl in my class has their own room. Don't you have yours?" I respond.

"No, we have two other cousins who came from the village who sleep with me in my room, and we all share two mattresses on the floor. Every night we put the mattresses together and sleep. When it is raining at night, the house girl also sleeps in our room."

I have never heard of a house girl and I have to ask. "What is a house girl?"

"The girl who looks after the house when we are at school and when my Mum and dad are at work. You don't have one?"

Na-car wear-sah has an interesting way of raising her voice at the end when asking questions.

"No, my Mum does all the work in the house and me and Richard help out in the holidays so that we can get our pocket money. So, how come you are going to sleep with your brother in the same room? Isn't that weird?"

Na-car-wear-sah sees absolutely nothing wrong with this.

"I'm glad I will be sleeping in my own bed. By the way, why is your garden so small? Where do you plant your food?" she raises a question.

"We get all our food from the supermarket, but we have an apple tree and the neighbours have a pear tree. I'll take you over to meet them after lunch. They are my best friends in the whole world. They are called the Stars and yesterday we had a rumble and then..." I wonder whether to tell her that I started bleeding.

"Na-car-wear-sah, have you started bleeding yet? Have you started your periods?"

She looks down on the floor.

"Yes. I am a woman. There are girls at home who are my age and already married and soon they will have children."

"What? How about school? Don't they want to get jobs and become rich?" I am alarmed.

"Of course they will marry rich men and become rich and have many children. I also want to marry a rich man and have many children," she replies.

"Well, I will never get married but I will live in a big house with many servants," I state proudly.

"Let's go outside so I can show you Tiger."

Richard and Wah-loo-seem-bee are already playing football in the garden. Na-car-wear-sah says she does not know how to ride a bike and I promise to teach her.

The next couple of weeks on Purley Avenue are fun while we teach our cousins how to skateboard, ride a bike, ride on a train and even swim. When they meet The Stars for the first time, it is only Happy Sam who is friendly. The rest don't get why Wah-loo-seem-bee is so white and even when I say he was born that way, they turn away from him and say he can't join The Stars. Dolores takes an immediate fancy to Wah-loo-seem-bee. She comes over to our house almost every day asking for him. She wears even shorter and tighter skirts. Soon we see them holding hands and walking to the park together. I ask my cousin why he is always in sunglasses and a hat and he says that he needs it because of his skin. Dolores goes right ahead and buys him two new pairs of sunglasses and writes a note telling him how much she loves him. She's so silly.

One day, when we have all come back from the park planning for my eleventh birthday party which is a few days away, Dolores declares right in front of us that she is going to take Wah-loo-seem-bee to Spain to meet her grandparents. Now I really know these cabbage patch kids are going crazy. Maybe it's the heat, or maybe it's because we haven't had a rumble in such a long time.

When we get home, I tell my Mum that Dolores wants to take Wah-loo-seem-bee to Spain to meet her grandparents. My Mum says that it is absurd and will never happen. Dolores doesn't believe me and she brings her parents to our house the next day. My parents and her parents sit together in the kitchen and lock the door so we can't hear anything. When they come out, Dolores' Mum takes her hand and they walk out. I don't know what happened but I get the feeling that my cousin will not be going to Spain.

I know what I want for my eleventh birthday. I want a bigger bike, a baseball jacket, a set of magic colours and a new school bag since I'll be a senior after the summer. Mum has already bought the cake and kept it on the top shelf in the store but I already got a peek and it's chocolate with Smarties on top shaped in the letter R. Anyway, my birthday's tomorrow and I'm not supposed to know where the cake is. I know that Richard is getting me a basketball net and ball. I love my brother. I don't know what my cousins are getting me but Na-car-wear-sah has been spending the whole day in the kitchen cleaning, making cupcakes and washing glasses. Today she acted really funny. She said that she wanted to teach me the Ugandan dance. How could I say no? Anyway, she got my sweater and tied it around my waist and did the same with hers. I then see her waist going this way and that and her head bobbing up and down to imaginary drums. It was kind of cool actually. I tried it and she told me my shoulders were moving so much. I don't think I'll ever be able to get the dance but it's actually fun. She'll be a great sister to have.

I'm always the first to wake up on my birthday. It's a hot Saturday morning. Going downstairs, I want to check for surprises. The first surprise is Na-car-wear-sah. She is in the kitchen making a huge breakfast. There is bacon sizzling and the bowls laid for cereal.

"Happy birthday baby sis."

"Thanks Na-car, thanks a lot but you didn't have to do all this." I can't help smiling at her. The table is full of food and she even whipped up cream for the strawberries. Soon, we're all eating at the table to the biggest breakfast I've ever eaten in my life.

"So, what time are your friends coming?" Dad asks.

"I told them the party starts at 1 o'clock and ends at 6. I hope they all come."

"I'm sure they will," Mum says. "So are you going to wear what I got you?" she continues, "I put it on your bed."

Without waiting for another word, I run up the stairs. On my bed are a pair of blue leggings, a blue headband to match and a baggy pink T-shirt which is so in these days. I rush to bathe and then put it on. I can't wait to

ride Tiger in my new clothes. It's such lovely weather outside. Mum has put helium balloons around the cake table and the goody bags are underneath it. Dolores is the first to arrive. She comes with her new boyfriend. Wah-loo-seem-bee doesn't seem to mind one bit. He actually goes and says hi and gives her a hug. Dad says he is a gentleman. She gives me my present and then goes off with her boyfriend. Julie, Jackson and Justin arrive next. Julie is in a pink dress with bubbles. Richard takes her hand and I see him give her a quick peck on the cheek. Some of my classmates get here too and the last people to arrive are Happy Sam and his brothers and sisters who I did not even invite. They are so noisy, always laughing loudly and wearing funny hats. Anyway, they got me presents so it's okay. Soon, we're playing musical chairs and Na-car wins each time. She's so good at the music games. Even though she's better than me at the music games, I'm still better than she is at riding the bike. I'm glad everyone is having fun and even gladder at the pile of presents near the cake table. When it's time for hide and seek, it's easy for me coz I know all the hiding places at home.

Soon Mum calls us to cut the cake. She has lit eleven candles around it. I know what I'm going to wish for. I'm going to wish for... Just as I am about to blow them out, in walk the last two people I ever thought I will see again, Punch and Judy, the Kenyan twins, my best friends in the whole world. Everyone is silent as they walk towards us. My Mum is just as shocked as the rest of us. Behind them, is their Mum. Dad quickly gets them chairs to sit on.

"We did not know you had come back. You are very welcome," he says.

Punch and Judy come to us and I don't know what to say so I give them my fist and they return the Stars greeting.

"I didn't know you guys were here," I say.

"Our dad decided to stay in Kenya for a while."

After a long pause he adds "He got a job but we'll be going back every summer to visit him and he promises to send presents on birthdays and Christmas. We came back with our Mum."

I don't know what to say. I want to cry because I am so happy my best friends are back. I want to cry but I can't because I'm the best non-crier on Purley Avenue.