

## When I was still eleven . . .

I have an ache in the pit of my belly, and a metal taste in my mouth, the kind that comes up just before you puke.

Out of my bedroom window I see Millie stride around the corner. I close my eyes and start counting . . . making my deal with Notsurewho Notsurewhat. If she's here on the count of zero, I'll go to school; if not, I'm taking a sickie. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zer—

Millie's determined hand clanks our letterbox right on the 'o'.

Now, the usual scuffle as we try to find the keys.

'Who is that at this time of the morning? It's only seven thirty, for God's sake,' shouts Dad from the top of the stairs.

'What if there was a fire? We'd all be locked in,' yells Mum from the kitchen.

As if prompted, the smoke alarm sirens its high-pitched squeal.

‘Krish, you’ve burnt the toast again,’ moans Mum, as she confiscates his football, mid-flight.

‘But I like it burnt.’

It’s true, he does.

I’m always the first to find the keys.

‘It’s only Millie,’ I yell back.

‘Does your bell *still* not work?’ groans Millie, peering round me at the spectacle of Mum dementedly wafting a tea towel at the smoke alarm.

When its screech is finally silenced, Mum lets out a world-weary sigh. Then she spots Millie standing in front of her.

‘Ah, Millie! You’re the early bird this morning,’ she chirps, as if keeping the lid on a ready-to-blow pan of popcorn. By the look on Millie’s face, she knows my mum has totally lost the plot.

‘Muuuum, Laila’s lobbed porridge at me again. It’s splatted all over me,’ shrieks Krish as Mum spins on her heels, tea towel whirling. Millie, who only has one very sensible older sister, stares at the massacre of our breakfast table. Now Laila turns her widest gurgly grin on Millie, as if she’s done something to be truly proud of.

‘Don’t make a fuss, Krish . . . just run upstairs and get changed now,’ Mum pleads.

‘Laila, you’re SUCH a pain. That was my best Spurs top,’ moans Krish, throwing his spoon across the

room, slamming the door and stomping back upstairs.

‘What’s all the noise about?’ shouts Dad, appearing at the top of the staircase in a towel, his face smeared in shaving foam.

‘Oh! Millie, it’s you.’ Dad grimaces, backing away from the banisters.

Millie grabs the door handle, ready for a quick escape.

‘We’ve got to be in early for Literature Club,’ she announces.

Mum looks blank.

‘To work with the writer . . . you know, the “Spring into Writing” project,’ Millie explains to Mum, whose vacant expression doesn’t change. ‘Didn’t you get a letter?’

She didn’t because I didn’t give it to her. If I show Mum or Dad anything like that, they’re always so interested, so enthusiastic, they would just go on and on about how important it is to be able to ‘express’ yourself, so I just don’t tell them.

Mum shakes her head, turning to me accusingly. ‘You didn’t mention it, Mira.’

‘I forgot. Sorry.’

Only four of us turn up. I think Miss Poplar, our ‘there for us’ Year Seven tutor, is a bit embarrassed, because she’s the one who’s set up this whole thing. She keeps fussing on about how well she’s advertised the group,

but the writer just smiles sweetly and says that we're a 'jewel-sized cluster'.

The writer woman is called Miss Print.

'Don't laugh - I've heard all the gags before,' she says.

Nobody laughs.

Miss Print tells us that as well as being a writer, she reviews children's books for newspapers. She's doing these workshops as part of her research to understand 'the reading habits' of ten- to thirteen-year-olds. It makes us sound like a rare species off *Animal Planet*.

'Who knows, maybe some of you will write a book for me to review.'

That seems like a bit of a long shot to me. I suppose, out of all of us, maybe Millie could write a book . . . one day.

Miss Print starts by asking us our names. She says you have to watch out for writers because they won't think twice about stealing your name if it's a good one. She says if you're going to make up characters in books names are important. Miss Print wants us to call her 'Pat', but she doesn't like her name - it makes her think of a footprint in a cowpat . . . Pat Print . . . now she's said it, I can see what she means. Apparently, in the village where she grew up, there was a fashion to call girls by boys' names. She thinks it's because they were farmers and really they only wanted

boys to work the farms, so if you were born a girl they just gave you a name that could be made into a boy's name anyway.

Miss Print, I mean Pat, does look a bit like a man. She's got a bony face and short brown wiry hair, cut over the ears and right into the nape of her neck. It's the kind of sensible cut my dad hates when he's just come back from the barber's. You can tell she's a woman though, because of her delicate swan neck . . . and her gentle watery eyes; they're grey-blue, the colour of slate. They actually look younger than the rest of her. Pat Print is one of those people whose age it's very difficult to guess. She's tall and strong-looking. On her feet she's wearing walking boots with dried mud caked to the bottom. It's hard to make out the exact shape of her body because it's covered by a baggy navy blue cardigan, cashmere I think, with holey elbows. She's not wearing any jewellery, not even a ring. Miss Print, I mean Pat, is obviously very posh. My nana says there's no such thing as 'posh', but there is - Pat Print is posh.

She starts by asking us our names, but the way she does it isn't like a register at all. It just feels like she really wants to know who we are. Even so, it's me who's sitting next to her dreading the sound of my own shrill voice slicing into the silence.

'Mira Levenson,' I whisper.

There, it's over.

'Millie Lockhart.'

Her voice is steady, low and confident.

Ben Gbemi booms his name around the classroom as if he's calling across a playing field. And finally, Jidé Jackson speaks. The strange thing about Jidé is how gentle he looks compared to how he acts. The two just don't add up.

'It's Jidé with an accent - not Jeed like speed - you say the "e" in Jidé like the "e" in Pelé . . . you get me?'

'Acutely!' grins Pat Print. 'Now we've got that straight I think we can conclude that some of our parents clearly enjoy alliteration. Anyone know what alliteration is?'

Millie shoots her hand up.

'No need to be so formal,' says Pat Print, smiling kindly at Millie, taking her hand and lowering it back down. 'That's the beauty of a small group. There's something about people putting their hands up that makes me nervous. It's healthy to be interrupted . . . stops people getting too comfortable with the sound of their own voice.'

That's a laugh because Pat Print is the sort of person you would never interrupt. Something about her really reminds me of my Nana Josie, like when she says the opposite of what you would expect most adults to say or think. I don't think Pat 'gives a toss', as Nana would say, what we think of her. To answer her question about alliteration, we all speak together, so you

can't actually hear what anyone says.

'That's right,' she shouts over us, as if she's heard each and every one of us. 'Alliteration is Pat Print, Jidé Jackson and Ben Gbemi, with a silent "G". As for Millie Lockhart, although you don't alliterate, your name is straight out of a romance novel.'

Millie giggles, and just when I think she's forgotten me altogether, she adds, 'And Mira Levenson is obviously a dual history name.' I don't say anything so she carries on talking, making another attempt to cue me in to her conversation. 'Taking a guess, I would say that one of your parents has Indian heritage . . . I think Mira's an Indian name, am I right?' I nod. 'And Levenson. Is that Jewish? "Lever" to rise, and "son" . . . could be "baker's son"? I'm taking a wild guess here, but it's one of my pet interests . . . discovering the derivation of names.'

The way she speaks you can really tell how much she loves words, as if she's tasting them on her tongue. She pauses for a minute, waiting for a reply, but I blush up my usual attractive colour of crimson. I have no idea if that's what my surname means, but she's right about the Indian Jewish thing, so I just nod, because I can't think of a single thing to say.

'And I suppose Jidé Jackson isn't a "dual history name"?' Jidé mocks.

I haven't thought about it before, but I suppose it must be.

‘I imagine so, *and* you alliterate,’ smiles Pat Print, unfazed. Jidé just scowls back at her, as if to say, ‘It’s none of your business.’ Jidé never wants to talk about himself but Pat Print won’t let this one drop. For next week’s class she asks us to research our name. We have to find out why our parents gave us our first names and ‘the derivations’ of our surnames.

‘Names hold histories, so get digging,’ Pat Print orders, rummaging in her beaten-up old satchel and handing out a passage of writing to each of us.

We have to say what we think of the piece we’ve been given. What I notice first is the tense it’s written in. When I read something in the present tense, I can disappear into it, like I do when I’m painting. It’s as if I don’t exist any more; I just get lost somewhere in there among the characters . . .

*It’s hard to say exactly what it is that makes me hate school so much. It starts the moment I wake up and realize that I have to step into my bottle-green uniform. That’s when it seeps away, what little confidence I have. On with the shirt . . . I’m slipping away . . . the pinafore to keep me in my place . . . and now the tie . . . to knot tight the hard lump of swallowed words swelling my throat. The day drags on . . . hour after hour until 3.30 p.m.*

*What is it about me they can detect, even through the armour of this uniform? I’ve never been able to get a comb through my hair, more frizz than curls – that probably*

*doesn’t help. Girls are supposed to have silken locks, aren’t they? All I want to do is work on the farm, feed the pigs, climb trees or just stand on the open moorland catching the force of the weather and never wear this stupid skirt, never ever again. Instead, I’m trapped neatly in my row of wooden desks, with the golden-locked Jacky sticking the tip of her freshly sharpened pencil deep into my right thigh.*

Pat comes over and asks how I’m getting on. I nod. I tell her I understand this passage . . . it draws me in. I try to explain the tense thing but somehow it doesn’t come out right.

‘I’m glad you like that one because it’s one of mine. It’s a memoir of “the happiest days of my life” . . . Ha ha!’

I nod. I want to tell her that I know exactly how she felt, but as usual the words won’t come.

‘The tense thing is a really complex idea,’ she agrees, nudging me for a response.

I just stand in front of her nodding and looking stupid. I can feel everyone’s eyes fixing on me, but luckily so can she, so she stands up and taps on the desk, shifting the spotlight.

‘Pick out one line from the passage you’ve been reading, something that really grabs you, just a line or a phrase . . . something you would like to have written yourself. It’s an exercise I call “Stealing Lines”.’