

I don't understand why I have to change from being English to African and coloured to black. Wunmi tries to beat the English out of me every morning before I go to school. Most mornings I forget to rub cream into my skin and she says: "What am I going to do with this English child?" before she licks me with a belt.

"I don't want you mixing with any West Indian children because they're all troublemakers, and you're not to play with English children either as they will corrupt your mind," she warns.

"But you just said I'm English."

"You brainwashed child. You're African. What have those Dr Barnardo's people done to my child?"

I leave for school feeling puzzled, not knowing who I can talk to, and how I work out who is West Indian and who isn't. I still feel English and don't want to be anything else.

At school, some girls come up to me and ask: "Why are you so black?" I sit next to Josephine in class and she says I'm black like a non-stick Teflon frying pan.

"Are you African?" she inquires.

"No, I'm English."

"You're African, that's why you're so black."

"I'm coloured like you."

"I wouldn't use the word coloured in this school. That's racism."

"What's racism?"

She looks at me as if I have two heads. "No one is coloured here, some people are burnt black like you, others are half-caste, some have crocodile skin, and some are dundus."

"But I'm the same colour as you."

She almost falls off her seat with fear and says: "No way, José. I'm a red skin." She asks me where my parents are from.

"My mother was born in Nigeria."

"See, I told you that's why you're so black. Where is your dad from?"

"Oh, he's from St Kitts," I make up. I had read about the island of St Kitts in a book and the name sounded romantic.

"Well, that's cool. But you're still half African. You better just talk about your dad while you're in this school."

I don't want to be in this school. I want to be back in the Village where nobody mentions colour and where most of us aren't sure where we really come from. Auntie Claire's voice still haunts me. As if she was standing beside me, I can hear her proudly saying we are all the same. When I ask Annabel her opinion she says: "When you come to live in heaven there will be no prejudice at all."

After three weeks I make my first friend. I meet her on the bus on my way home. She is wearing the proper school uniform but she uses her school tie as a ribbon in her brown wavy hair. Most of the girls at Edgware Towers live in West London, so I have been travelling south all on my own. So when Henrietta taps me on my shoulder and asks if she can sit next to me, I'm so excited that I want to tell her everything. But Wunmi has reinvented my life, I must tell

people I have been at boarding school in a small village in Essex. I think of telling her about Annabel, but know she is best kept in my head.

Henrietta taps me on the shoulder again and says: "You must be brainy, you're always thinking. I've watched you reading on the bus most days." I can't believe she wants to speak to me and I feel overwhelmed with tears.

"What's wrong?"

"Nobody likes me."

"I do."

"What about everybody else?"

"They like you. They just think you're strange, with your posh voice, and..."

"I know they all laugh behind my back because I wear my skirts so short."

"Oh, you can sort that out. My mum used to do that to me until I started choosing pleated skirts, and now she doesn't know how to take them up."

"What about my briefcase?"

"That makes you look smart. We can swap bags if you like?"

We travel all the way to Victoria and practise counting in binary on our fingers. Henrietta gets off at a big concrete estate, but we plan to meet up at the bus station every day for school.