

Name-calling

"I think I've told you enough stories to choke a horse," Miss Pointy said, surprising us the next afternoon. "I'm in the mood to do some listening. Remember I suggested a while back that you could write stories in your journal about how you got your name? I was thinking that maybe some of you wouldn't mind reading those aloud."

This was very exciting, because, of course, we were not allowed to read other people's journals without their permission (even though I had snuck again and read Darrell's the other afternoon). Miss Pointy passed them out. Several kids waved their hands in the air. "Pick me!" "Pick me!" In my imagination, I raised my hand, but then in my imagination, she called on me and I had to read it, and kids yawned and threw paper at me. So

instead of raising my hand, I slunk down in my seat and smiled at my classmates. I was eager to hear what they had written.

"Ernie? You have your hand raised so quietly." Boys who weren't called on groaned. "Come, stand in front of my desk so we all can hear you."

"My full name is Ernest Meija the Second," he read, "and I was named after Ernest Meija the First, my mother's brother. He is a fireman with the Chicago Fire Department. He was the first child born in this country from my family. He helps my family a lot. He has never been killed on the job, but he had a friend who was. He told me when he is fighting fires he always tries to save the family pet if he can. I think he is very brave and I am proud to be named after my brave uncle Ernie."

He looked up, finished.

"Comments?" asked Miss Pointy.

"Your uncle Ernie sounds cute," said Mariah.

"Yeah," agreed Janine and Cordelia.

"How old is your uncle Ernie, Ernie?" asked Miss Pointy.

"He's around thirty, I think."

"Too old for you, girls," said Miss Pointy. "And hundreds of years too young for me."

"How old *are* you?" asked Sakiah.

"In human years, or teacher years?" Miss Pointy answered, and then quickly called on someone else.

"That's nice, he saves cats," said Larry.

"Ees good," said Boris, who hardly ever talks. He was smiling openly at Ernie, his friend. He looked like a proud poppa. Ernie blushed.

Miss Pointy looked pleased. "Well done, Ernie!" Some thin applause. "Who else here has been named after a family member?" Many hands went up. "It's nice to have a family name with some history. Paris? Your name has some history, too. Why don't you step right up."

Paris cleared her throat.

"My Name,' by Paris McCray. My mother and father named me after the capital of France, the city of love and romance. For instance, in France they love pancakes called *crêpes*. I know how to make them, my mom showed me. They love poodles so much that they let them eat in the

restaurants like people. There is an Eiffel Tower there, and many great churches, and many artists went to live there, including but not limited to the great Josephine Baker, who danced naked before it was in style to do so."

"Woo!" said Raphael. "I see London, I see France!"

"It is all very exotic," Paris continued, "and furthermore people speak French all the time, for example. I do not know how to speak French, but I hope to learn in high school. My mom and dad never went to France. They were going to go, but then my mom got pregnant. It was a surprise because my parents already had four kids. They needed the money more than the trip, so my mom said if we can't go to Paris, then Paris will come to us. Someday I will go to Paris and wave from the top of the Eiffel Tower to my parents who will be eating crêpes down below. The end."

"That was good," said Veronica.

Cordelia disagreed, and showed it by gagging. "Naked people! Dogs in restaurants! Paris sounds like a filth hole!"

"Oh, Cordelia, be quiet," said Tanaeja. "You don't even know what you're talking about."

Cordelia jutted out her chin. "Excuse me! I have been to France, and speak fluent French!"

This was, of course, the wrong thing to say in front of someone named Poitier. "*Est-ce que c'est vrai? As-tu mangé un croque-monsieur quand tu as visité? Moi, j'adore les croques-monsieurs, presque plus que les crêpes.*"

"I'm sorry," Cordelia sniffed. "I'm afraid I only speak northern French."

"Naturellement," Miss Pointy said innocently. "I was merely wondering how you found the grilled cheeses over there."

"I found them extremely filthy," said Cordelia.

"Really! I found them delicious. I also found your paragraph delicious, Paris. Very romantic. *Vive la France!*" We applauded especially loudly, just to spite Cordelia.

"*Vive la Paris McCrepe!*" cheered Dominique. Paris bowed elegantly.

"I wish I had me a plane ticket to France," said Kiarre.

"Would you like to go, too, Kiarre?" asked Miss Pointy.

"No. I'd just love to send Cordelia and get her lying self out of this classroom."

We laughed. "Now, now," said Miss Pointy, "kind words in the classroom." She didn't say Cordelia wasn't a liar. And Kiarre said sorry, but she said it more to Miss Pointy than to Cordelia. I felt a little sorry for Cordelia. Just a little.

"Paris wasn't the only one who was named after a place. Sahara? Would you read what you wrote?"

Me? I hadn't been up in front of a class in at least a year. Or two years. Didn't she know that about me? Suddenly, I wished she were the kind of teacher who looked at records.

"Sahara?"

There it was again, she was calling my name. I tried to feel my legs. They felt like two Popsicle sticks with all the Popsicle melted off. I shook my head, no.

"Oh, come on, Sahara," said Miss Pointy.

"Please?" coaxed Paris.

I looked at Rachel. She smiled, and nodded her head, excited.

"I'll go, then," Cordelia sighed, like she was being inconvenienced. "'Cordelia Carbuncle: Ruby of the Seven Seas.'"

"Sahara, just get up and read your damn thing!" Kiarre barked. I teetered forward.

I stared down at my journal entry. I felt all eyes on me, I felt the room tilt just slightly. "I didn't check the spelling," I confessed.

Miss Pointy shrugged. "Neither here nor there."

"It's personal," I whispered hoarsely.

"All good writing is personal," she whispered hoarsely back. "Pretend you're reading somebody else's writing, you'll get through it."

"It's weird," I pleaded. "It's long."

"Not as weird and long as waiting for you to do this," said Miss Pointy, not whispering. Embarrassed, I turned to face the class. "Take a deep breath," she suggested, behind me. I did.

"'My Name,' by Sahara Jones," I began.

"Louder," she ordered.

"'My Name,' by Sahara Jones," I said again.

"Louder, and with expression!"

I swallowed. "'MY NAAAAME,' by SaHARA JONES!" I yelled. The class laughed.

"Good," said Miss Pointy. "Go on."

I can see how my daddy thought my name was a good idea at the time I was born. He must have thought that naming me after the biggest part of Africa would make me special. But special wears off. At least, it did for my daddy. He left me and my mom when I was in the third grade. We're not sure where he is.

When he left, Mom changed our last name back to Jones, which was her name before she got married. "You can change your first name, too, if you want," she told me. "We don't need nothing that man gave us."

That last line wasn't so hard to write. Why was it so hard to read? I swallowed again.

"Go on," said Miss Pointy. "You're doing great."

I didn't mind my name, and I didn't exactly agree with my mom, but I didn't let on. It's not every day that

your mother gives you permission to change your name.
"Okay," I said. "Call me Shaquana."

"Shaquana!" My mom wrinkled her nose.

I heard the class laugh. It startled me. I found my place again and kept reading.

"Jennifer?"

"Girl, I know you're joking," Mom said. "Put a little more thought into it than that. A name's got to last a long time."

I ran through lots of names in my mind for a few days. Aisha. Candace. Saundra. Camille. Shalonda. Dolores. Denise. It made my head spin.

One day we had a substitute, and during science she showed us a video about the great African desert, the Sahara. A few kids laughed and pointed out that I was named after a desert, but once that was said, nobody seemed very interested in the video. Except for me. I was finally going to see what my father named me after.

The sand had ripples all through it, like it was remembering water. A sun dipped down at the edge of

the horizon. It shook in the waves of heat like a great orange fist. The desert beneath spread flat and dry, knowing that under its sands lived scorpions that are especially venomous, snakes that can smell the taste of you, tortoises that know no time. The desert is mystery. To cross it, you have to be a camel. You have to use what you have for yourself, keep what you need inside yourself, in a big sagging hump. A camel only spares enough to spit. This is the way to survive the desert, I thought, as they showed the darkness of night leaning over the dunes.

As the video played I could hear the winds picking up as the desert night grew colder and colder. I felt my own teeth chatter, and I couldn't stop them. I wasn't Sahara, the girl, anymore. I was Sahara, the desert, filled with secret scorpions. And even though I know that deserts are very dry places, I started to cry and cry and cry.

I guess somebody told the teacher, because the next thing I knew, she was kneeling next to my desk saying, "What's the matter, honey?"

And I told her, "I think I'm having a heart attack."
She looked back at me like maybe she was going to

have one, too. She made me open my mouth and say "Ahhh," like you can tell if someone is having a heart attack by looking down her throat. She pulled me out of my seat and dragged me down the hall to the office. But as soon as I was out of that classroom and away from that movie, I felt better right away.

"My name is Sahara," I said to my mom, first thing when I came through the door. "Sahara Jones."

She looked at me in such a way, I wondered if she was swallowing a pill.

Finally, she said, "Wish I'd-a thought of it first."

But my name has changed since my daddy left. I didn't change it, and neither did my mom. Last year when I was in Special Needs, some kids started calling me Sahara Special. I know they were saying it to be mean, but now I like it anyway. My names are given to me, but they are also names that I choose to take. And the choosing makes all the difference.

"I stopped writing there because the bell started ringing. Plus, I was finished anyway," I said. There was silence. "So, the end." There was still silence.

My leg was shaking so hard, I felt like I wanted to hold on to it with both hands. My palms were sweating, and my heart was pounding. I could not bring myself to lift my eyes from my journal. There was no noise. Were they still in the room? Were they all asleep? Were they still alive?

"Comments?" said Miss Pointy.

Still nothing. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Darrell give me a funny look.

"Come on," urged Miss Pointy. "Let's give her some feedback."

"Well, what you want us to say?" Angelina finally said.

"Actually, I have some notes here," Cordelia cleared her throat. "I think she meant to say, 'I was finally going to see that after which I was named,' not 'I was finally going to see what I was named after.'"

Michael's voice even rolled its eyes. "What's the difference?"

"The difference is English," said Cordelia.

"She speaks English. There's plenty big words,"

said Janine. "How'd she know all those words like . . . what'd you say?"

"Darkness of night leaning over the duuuuu-unnnessss," hummed Angelina. "Tortoisesssss that know no tiiiiimmmmmme."

"Yeah, like that! How'd she know all those words like that!"

"Yeah, she writes like a grown-up!" said Raphael. "All that 'he said, she said.'"

"I read a lot," I mumbled. See, they hated it! They thought it was weird! They thought I was weird! I *was* weird! I blinked; I would not cry in front of them.

"Maybe she copied it from somewhere," said Leon.

"No, she didn't," came Rachel's voice. I was surprised to hear it. "She told me this summer that she was going to be a writer, and she is going to write a book."

"A real book? In the library?" Ernie was impressed.

"Uh-huh," I said. Luz leaned over and whispered something to Paris, and they both looked at

me, excited. I bet they were planning the next meeting of our club, for people who like reading *and* writing. And . . . uh . . . esteekers.

"What's it going to be about?" asked Sakiah.

"No, no, no!" Miss Pointy stood up. "Don't ask writers what they're writing about. If it comes out of their mouths, it won't come out of their pens."

"At first, I thought it was funny. Then it wasn't funny at all," said Ameer.

"It was *great*!" yelled Paris. I looked up.

"You got a good imagination," said Rashonda.

"Girl-I-di-int-know-that-you-could-write-like-that!" rapped Tanaeja. "Sahara-how-your-journal-get-down-like-that!"

The class laughed. I would have laughed, too, if I hadn't been so terrified.

"Sorry I said you copied," Leon said. "I just . . . it was good, Sahara."

"Yeah, Sahara," said Sakiah. "Wow."

"I theenk Sahara should get an esteeker," said Luz.

"She did," said Miss Pointy. "It's on her journal."

"I thought it was long," said Raphael. Everyone

ignored him, except for Tanaeja. "Course you did," she cooed, and patted his hand. He snarled at her and pulled his hand away.

"Well, what's the point of Sahara's story?" Everyone settled down and looked at one another. "Ernie? You're good at morals. What do you think the moral of the story is?" Ernie shook his head. "Anyone?"

"Don't judge book by its cover," came a voice.

"Who said that?" Miss Pointy looked around. "Darrell! I'm so proud of you!" She grinned so that all her teeth showed, and Darrell smiled back the same way, mimicking her.

"Yay, Darrell!" said Raphael.

"Don't make a stink about it," said Darrell.

"Yay, Sahara Special, then!" said Mariah.

"Yeah, yay, Sahara!" said Tanaeja and Kiarre.

I looked red-faced to Rachel, who was nodding and back to her quiet self . . . but this time I didn't mind, not one bit.

The whole class cheered. They cheered so loudly, I couldn't hear my heart breaking. But I could feel it. I guess Miss Pointy could see it. "And for such

inspirational writing, Sahara can be messenger and deliver this note for me. And Cordelia, you waited so patiently. It's your turn."

The class groaned, more jealous about my messenger job than they were about my writing. "As I was saying," Cordelia started up. "Cordelia Carbuncle: Ruby of the Seven Seas."

I took the envelope and stepped quickly out in the hall. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and leaned against the wall. Then I looked down at the envelope, expecting to see OFFICE, or a room number. It said SAHARA.

I opened it.

The note said, *Turn left*. So I turned left.

The note said, *Walk three paces*. So I took three steps.

The note said, *Turn left again*. So I did, and I was facing an old locker.

We weren't allowed to keep things in lockers because the upper-grade kids kept stealing lunches from them. So the lockers were used as storage for old textbooks. The note said, *Open*. So I opened the locker.

There was a small cactus in a pot, with a beautiful red flower in bloom at the top.

And behind it, a brown folder with my name on it.

My file.

The classroom door opened. Out stepped Darrell, holding the boys' pass. He closed the door, and faced me straight on, head bent, eyebrows bent, frowning.

"What?" I squirmed.

"You sent me that dumb poem, didn't you." I was too embarrassed to deny it. "I am *not* an orphan," he said.

"I know." I squirmed some more.

"And," he said, "neither are you."

He walked away, whistling, toward the boys' room. I reached behind the cactus and pulled out my file. I clutched it to my chest with both arms.

Autobiographia Literaria

I ran into my room at home and closed the door. I couldn't wait.

I spilled the envelope out on to my bed. On the top was a page ripped out of my journal that I had forgotten about.

Do teachers have secrets?

Yes. For instance, I like to give kids presents sometimes on the sly if I know what they really want. That's a good secret. Teachers' bad secrets, like getting caught smoking in the custodian's office or being fresh to the principal or having boyfriends that ride motorcycles, are kept in a dreadful file

somewhere. It's hard to get to a teacher's file. But student files are so easy to get your hands on.

Next in the pile was a letter from my mom. "I request my daughter be removed from the special education program." I smiled and turned the letter over.

And then, there were the letters I had written.

Dear Daddy, I miss you. . . .

Dear Daddy, When are you coming home. . . .

Dear Daddy, Why didn't you take me with you. . . .

Dear Daddy, It was my birthday, I wished it on my candles that you would call, and you didn't. . . .

Dear Daddy, Mom says you don't help with anything anymore but I don't care, I know you'll come back and help us. . . .

Dear Daddy, There's a hole in my heart. . . .

I turned them over, one by one, like cards in a fortune-teller's deck. But these weren't telling me the future, these were telling me the past. It was sad to see them, but it was funny, too, that they had kept them. Even though as I leafed through them I realized they all said the same thing, they all told the same story.

Miss Pointy says, the main character is the one who changes.

I held one of the letters I had written in third grade up to the light from the window. I couldn't help smiling at my round, careful cursive. *Dear Daddy, Can't you see from my handwriting what kind of girl I am, will that make it enough for you to come home to me?*

The clouds outside were high and generous big, moving fast. I opened the window. I closed my eyes and held out the piece of paper, let it flutter in my open palms. When I opened my eyes, I saw it flapping in the sky like a bird, flying away.

I tossed out the next letter, and the next, making birds, until the last one. As I watched them tumble past the brown brick of the buildings, east,

east to the lake, I wrote one last letter in my mind's eye.

Dear Daddy,

I love you. I miss you. I hope someday you're smart enough to be sorry, but if you're not, that's okay. I'm smart enough not to keep all this in my file.

Love, your daughter and secret writer,
Sahara Jones, now and forever

In my mind's eye, I ripped it in half. In my mind's eye, I let the pieces loose, let them climb the stairway of the wind past the buildings, past the lake, past the moon and stars and sun, to Somewhere Else, the place where my father now lives.

And then, I pulled out my notebook and wrote, and wrote, and wrote. Not about my *Heart-Wrenching Life Story*, but all these pages about a teacher and her *Amazing Adventures* with her class, all about a teacher's file and a teacher's secrets. I wrote about friends and tattletales, bravery and

fear, but for the first time, it didn't all have to be straight true, I could write about all the exciting things I wished were true. The words moved like wheels across the paper. I didn't count pages or minutes. Mom tapped on my door, and only then did I notice the sun had gone down and I was writing nearly in the dark. The whole apartment was warm. The radiators clanged like music. I could smell meat loaf in the oven. Mom had fried potatoes with lots of onions and butter. She was making my favorite meal for dinner. Where had I been?

"You've been sitting in here forever." My mother flicked on the light switch and squinted at me. Had I? It was like magic, like Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep and found himself a hundred years older when he opened his eyes. I unfurled my fingers, fossilized and aching around the pen.

"Dinner's on."

"Almost finished."

"Whatcha writing now?" she asked.

"Sketching out some adventures," I confessed.

"I've already finished my *Autobiographia Literaria*." In

one second I was embarrassed that I was so eager. Mom's eyes were laughing at me.

"Who, now?"

"My life story. I have had a very interesting life," I said, defending myself.

"Me, too." Her eyes were glinting. "Fascinating. And it's over?"

I ignored her. "I'm starting something new."

"Maybe you'll show it to me sometime?"

"If you want," I said. "It'll be in the library." I felt her bristle. Did she think I was being fresh? I turned in my chair to correct myself, to explain that it *was* promised to the library, behind section 940, to be found by someone in the future, someone whose life will be made more exciting just by reading my *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures*. But the doorway was already empty.

While we ate, I could hear the silverware against the plates.

"It's good, Mom," I complimented her and smiled. She smiled back. She looked at me for a long time. It made me nervous, so I looked at my meat loaf.

"So, what did you do at school?"

I shrugged. "Kids read aloud from their journals."

"Lord, they sure waste your time at school, don't they?" said Mom. "Just writing and talking about any old thing that pops into your head. Bet them kids in the suburbs learning calculus by now." She didn't know what to say next, I could tell. "You're growing up," is what she finally came out with.

"How do you know?" I teased.

"You're not talking to me." She smiled sadly.

"I talk to you," I filled my mouth with potatoes.

"I guess I don't know how to speak your language."

I laughed a little, like she had made a joke, like we were talking about why firemen wear red suspenders or what time it is when an elephant sits on a fence, and she laughed, too. We ate the rest of the meal in thoughtful silence.

But that night, I climbed into bed with her, and she didn't say anything against it. She held me

firm with one arm around my shoulder, like she didn't want me to go anywhere. I stared at the ceiling and felt uneasy and excited at once, like I was destined to end up Somewhere Else anyway, no matter how she held me.

"Sing to me," she said, half-joking. "Tell me a story. Tell me your autobiographia whatever."

I took a breath. I thought about what poem to spend. I spoke to her softly, like I was singing a lullaby.

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the

center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

Imagine, I thought.

She gently stroked my hair, making sure I was there. It was comforting, but now, I didn't need it. It was extra credit.

ESMÉ RAJI CODELL

is an avid collector of sparkly stickers and a pretty good roller skater. She is also the author of *Educating Esmé: Diary of a Teacher's First Year*, which won an Alex Award, given for the best adult books for young adults. She has worked as a children's bookseller, teacher, and school librarian, and now runs the popular children's literature Web site www.planetesme.com. Esmé lives in Chicago with her husband and son.