

## **Elizabeth Smyth**

A writer for the tropics

### **Will it leave a scar?**

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Ebanee pinches her nose to stop herself from crying. And Mum looks at her with those volcano eyes, all red around the edges. Ebanee had a sore like that once, I remember, wet and leaking. And Mum said, 'You have to let it dry.' Now I watch Mum's eyes and wait for them to scab over. Another time, Mum said she wanted to be a child like me and start her life again. She could be thinking that now. But what she doesn't know is that some kids are luckier than others. Some kids get good things they don't deserve. She shouldn't want to be a kid like me.

In our family, Dad is the strongest one. He never cries. When things go wrong, he gets angry. Like the day he backed his car into a star picket. He had a mean look on his face and said stuff about insurance and a job he didn't need. And he said a swear word. The B one. If a kid says that, they get put in time out! What Dad didn't know is that it's good to run into star pickets. The stars hidden in those pickets follow you home, and you get to choose a special star to be yours, and it looks after you for the rest of your life. Yeah. Dad never understands important things like that.

Me and Ebanee keep on eating and staring at our plates so we don't have to see Mum's sad face. It's never easy to know why Mum cries. One time, she cried because a lady from work went and died. Banks must be dangerous. Maybe now another one has died. Ebanee leans over and whispers that she thinks Mum has brung home the dying disease and should stop going to that bank. As for me, I'll never work in a place where people get slaved into dying.

When we finish our toast, Dad shoves his phone in his pocket and looks around the kitchen as if he's spying on shoppers at the store. 'Time to go,' he says. And then, 'Ebanee. Get your shoes and socks!'

There were no socks in the drawer when we got out of bed this morning, except mine. And now, because we're not allowed to talk to Dad when he's frowning, we just stand where we are, Eb chewing on her fingers. I shift my eyes to Mum, hoping she stops sucking on air like a puffed kid and helps Ebanee find a pair of socks, but she doesn't move.

Most days Dad tells Mum what to do too, but now he's only looking at her as if us kids aren't even here. They have a secret, I reckon. Ebanee must be adopted after all. She should run away and live in an orphanage. Then I'll have a room to myself.

'Ebanee. Now!' Dad says, being mean.

Ebanee pinches her nose again. How can she get something when it isn't there? 'There aren't any socks,' she says, her face squashed like a pug. 'If you loved me,' she tells Dad, 'you would help me.'

Somehow this has made things worse. Mum heads for the tissues by the door, and Dad almost runs forward with his arms out in front, like he did at the sports carnival the day he told Mrs D about herding cats.

I follow Dad and Ebanee into our room, where the mice are asleep because a fairy cast a spell on them. Dad pulls a pair of dirty socks from under a school uniform on the floor.

‘These will do,’ he says.

‘I can’t wear those,’ Ebanee says. ‘They’re dirty.’

And Dad says, ‘If there are none clean, you need to wear these.’

He is big and strong and not to be argued with. I wonder what will go wrong for Ebanee if she wears those dirty socks. If it’s Tuesday, we’ll have to take our shoes off for music. Last time, the boys teased Jumping Ginger about her smelly shoes. But it wasn’t *her* shoes that smelled; it was Ryan’s. And now I figure Ebanee is wishing she was never born. She’s sitting on the floor, frowning at the dirty socks as she pulls them on. The ripping sound of the Velcro on her shoes makes music with the bubble wrap I’m stomping on.

Dad says, ‘In the car.’ Ebanee is already heading for the door.

‘Where’s Mum?’ I ask.

‘In the car!’

My school bag is heavy and hurts my shoulder as I walk to the garage and climb into the back seat of the car. Mum has her hands on the steering wheel, waiting. She turns and tries to smile, but her eyes are wrong.

On the way to school, an eerie cloud, black and square, hovers in front of the hills like a space ship coming down to Earth. I’ve never seen a cloud like that before, so dark and so neat. I wonder if the people in other cars can see it. The drivers coming towards us look like unhappy faces on a stick-man chart. Maybe they had to wear dirty socks too. The dogs smile though, their tongues flapping and dripping from furry heads stuck out of car windows.

Ebanee leans over and whispers again. ‘Ask Mum why she’s sad,’ she says. ‘What’s happening?’

I tell her, ‘Mum will say that it’s nothing for us to worry about.’

Ebanee shrugs and pulls a reading folder out of her bag to show me the sticker she got from the world-famous basketball player who plays for Cairns. Then, after putting the folder away, she shouts, ‘Mum. You forgot my lunchbox.’

Mum says, ‘Shit!’

We know to be totally quiet when Mum says the S word. Forgetting a lunchbox is bad, I don’t know why, and today I would share mine if it stopped Mum from sulking.

‘I’ll drop you off, then go home and get it,’ Mum says.

Our car pulls in at school, and I know the bell hasn't rung yet. Kids are running in all directions on the other side of the fence. Ebanee unclicks her seatbelt and pushes the door open. It's hard to get out of a car with a heavy school bag. Eb pulls on her bag from outside the car until it comes free. I slide across the seat and climb out too. But before I close the door, Ebanee says to Mum, 'You need to come with me.'

'Not today,' Mum says. 'There's no time. I have to get your lunchbox. You can do it.'

'But you always come with me.'

Ebanee is such a baby. This time she's pleading extra hard, I reckon, because there's something wrong with Mum. It's bad about the lunchbox, but that secret, whatever it is, must be way badder. After all, it was the secret that made Mum cry in the first place!

'Look,' Mum says. 'There's Sasha.'

The front passenger window whirrs down, and Mum calls out. 'Maree! Could Ebanee and Jaz go in with you and Sasha? I have to drive home and get a lunchbox.'

'Sure, no problem,' Sasha's mum says. 'Come on girls.'

Sasha's mum wears big loopy earrings and a lacy shirt that's totally see-through at the back. She closes our car door and I look at the strap of her bra and a tattoo of a blue fish and notice that whoever did the tattoo forgot to draw the water and the sky. We follow her past the teacher with the pretty face, and at the classroom, she says, 'Put your bags down girls. You still have ten minutes. Time to play.'

Sasha won't play with us, so Ebanee starts counting how many steps it takes to walk from the class to the hard court. 'One, two, three, four...'

'Do you want to play tiggly?' Kostya asks. He can't talk properly. No matter how many times we tell him, he never says his words right.

'Do you *want* to play tiggly,' Ebanee says. 'It's want, not vant.'

'Well, do you want to play or not?' Kostya says.

The teachers should send Kostya to Miss Jones, who teaches the kids with learning problems. Mum says you have to help other kids. But me and Ebanee have tried to help Kostya, and it never works. I reckon he could speak properly if he wanted to. The teachers should give him time out. We ignore Kostya, and he goes away.

'Five, six, seven ...,' Ebanee continues. 'What comes after nineteen?' she asks. 'Twenty or thirty?' But before I can answer, she starts running after a ball.

Near the lost property box, the grade fivers are hitting their hands together and shouting:

*Apple on a stick, makes me sick,  
makes my heart beat two forty-six.*

And now the bell rings.

There are certain things you have to do after the bell rings. You have to put your lunch box in the fridge, put your water bottle on the bench, put your diary in the plastic tray on Mrs Daly's desk, and put your reading folder in the box near the door. And if you do all those things and sit on the mat in front of the white board without speaking, you get a jewel. And if you get ten jewels by the end of the week, you get a prize from the prize box. It's a lot to remember. Ebanee is already doing these things. I look at the other kids, especially Sasha, to help me remember everything.

Later when a jewel is put in Ebanee's hand, she whispers, 'I didn't *want* a grey one. I wanted a *purple* one.' I feel sorry for her. Now she'll have to look at that ugly grey one for the rest of the week.

'Excuse me,' someone says.

The whole class leans in one direction like the sugarcane when it rains too much. At the door (interrupting Mrs D!) is Mum. 'I have a lunch box.'

Ebanee waits for Mrs D to tell her what to do, then she gets up, takes the lunch box from Mum, and puts it in the fridge. I wish Mum would hurry up and go.

First break comes up super fast.

'At least you got one,' Sasha tells Eb, then walks off with her mean friends.

'Easy for her to say,' Ebanee tells me. 'She got a purple one!'

Sasha always gets good things, like awards and new books and going to the school nurse. She went yesterday because she fainted. But she was only pretending, I reckon. Didn't even look sick! Just a bit yellow in the face. After that, kids crowded around her for the rest of the day, and Lucy gave her the crocodile rubber that *everybody* wants.

It's not like that for Ebanee. She never gets to go to the nurse, even though her tummy always hurts. The teacher's only say, 'Well, you're not vomiting, so it can't be too bad.' My idea is to break your arm. The teachers *have* to send you to the nurse then.

'Stop it, I don't like it,' I hear someone say. I spin around and Tarlia is frowning at Jacob. 'I'm trying to say something and you're just talking over me,' she says.

Behind them, two boys are lying on the hard court, one of them hugging a football. When they stand up, I look for blood on their knees. To the side of them, the new girl starts walking towards Tarlia. Probably wants to see the paper dragonfly she's holding.

You don't get thirsty on cloudy days, but Ebanee drinks from her water bottle anyway, because Mrs D says you have to have a drink at break. Now someone shouts, 'Mrs D, Mrs D! She's drinking from my water bottle.' Jacob is running towards us like a lunatic, and Mrs D keeps on talking to another teacher.

Ebanee yells at him. ‘Am not. It’s mine.’ Then shoves the water bottle back in her bag and pulls a face.

‘Good one, Eb!’ I say. Boys are stupid idiots.

‘Stupid idiot,’ Ebanee yells at Jacob’s back.

We’re bored now, so we wander through the crowd, through the shouts, the smack of basketballs on concrete, the high notes of handballs, and loud claps, ready to play if anyone asks, until a teacher orders us back to class. When that happens, you have to go as quickly as you can without running.

‘What are you doing?’ one of the boys asks Kostya, who’s pretending to throw up.

We join the queue outside the classroom as Mrs D points at words on the piece of yellow cardboard taped to the door. ‘Are you in a line?’ she asks us. This is not a question you have to answer. ‘Silent? Straight? Smiling?’ I don’t want to smile, so I don’t. Instead I look at the words as Mrs D touches them. I know the letter S and the letter T.

When we are *finally* allowed to move, we stumble towards the door, our shoes kicking into other shoes in front and behind. And this reminds me that Ebanee is wearing dirty socks. Near the door, I catch a glimpse of a bruised banana skin partly covering a splatter of something gross. Now we are inside.

Before I’ve found a place to sit, I hear the teacher say, ‘Mrs Jones will give you a USB today with photos of you and your class doing things at school.’ Ebanee whispers, ‘What’s a USB?’

I shrug. How should I know?

‘Listening, listening,’ Mrs D says. ‘Red Dragons, you are reading now. Take your books and your pencil cases to the other classroom. Mrs Kee is waiting for you. Leo and Shannon, are you Red Dragons? Yes. If you were listening, you would know to take your books and pencil cases to the other classroom. Quickly now, Mrs Kee is waiting.’

After school, Mum is sitting on a bench with Sasha’s mum. When we arrive, they stop talking. Mum’s eyes are *still* red, and Sasha’s mum looks at Ebanee and smiles. It makes no sense because Ebanee didn’t go to the nurse or get a purple jewel. ‘Let’s go,’ Ebanee says.

On the way home, Mum steers the car to the shops. I ask her, ‘Where are we going?’

‘To the doctor.’

‘I don’t want to go to the doctor,’ I tell her. ‘That’s boring.’

‘It’s not for you. It’s for Ebanee. For her tummy.’

Me and Ebanee play with the cards in the waiting room, while Mum talks to the doctor. We're busy separating the blues and the greens from the reds and the yellows when Mum comes and says, 'You can come in now.'

Ebanee dumps her handful of cards on the green table and goes with Mum. I follow them, because I have to, and because I want to see Ebanee get a needle.

This time, the doctor hands over a packet of jellybeans straight away, but when Eb tries to open them, Mum says, 'Not yet,' and I poke Ebanee in the belly and tell her she has to give me some.

'Ebanee,' the doctor says and we all look at her. 'Do you remember we took some pictures of your tummy?'

I remember. We had to wait for ages and ages and never got to see those dumb pictures anyway.

'They show something growing in your tummy,' the doctor says.

In the photo above the doctor's head, a grown-up boy is rowing a skinny boat. Taking a load of purple jewels to a secret castle, I reckon.

Ebanee asks, 'Is it a plant or a puppy?'

She is so stupid sometimes. It won't be anything like that. I bet she's thinking that because she has those lollies, she can be silly and get away with it.

'It's nothing like that,' the doctor says. See! 'It's called cancer. Have you heard that word before?'

'Yes,' Ebanee says, and her mouth almost disappears under her ratty nose. 'It's what you get before you die.'

The doctor looks at Ebanee as if she is handing out extra homework, and Ebanee sits up straight with her hands in her lap like Sasha. I know what she's thinking. She's thinking this will be a good day after all. First the jellybeans up front, and now this! The kids at school will be so excited. Having cancer is way better than fainting.

'People with cancer don't always die,' the doctor says. 'You have a type that we have a good chance of fixing. But it's been growing in your tummy for a long time. We need to do an operation to take as much of it out as we can.'

An operation! What about me? Why should Ebanee get cancer and not me?

'Will it leave a scar?' Ebanee asks.

I'm the one who has always wanted a scar. Ask anyone!

'Maybe a little one,' the doctor says. 'The surgeons are experts. You'll hardly notice it.'  
Bad luck orphan girl!

I turn to Mum who is still sulking about her secret. Why don't adults ever have fun? She wipes her nose with the back of her hand and says, 'Thank you, doctor. Then turns to us and says,

'Come on girls. Let's go and buy an ice cream. We deserve a treat.'

Outside, the sky has become a place where some boy could row a boat full of purple jewels and be happy forever.

Ebanee asks Mum, 'Will I lose my hair?'

'How do you know about that?'

Mum's hands are shaking now. She must be as excited too. Imagine the look on Sasha's face when Mrs D tells the class that Ebanee has cancer. She'll be totally jealous. And I plan to throw a grey jewel in her open mouth.

Eb takes hold of Mum's hand, and I lag behind. I stare at them through my eyebrows. Ebanee is lucky at last. Tomorrow will be the best day of her life.