



## **The Eyes of Oshie Black**

His name was Black and his eyes were the bluest blue in the universe. They were a blue which belonged under the sea or up in the sky, on a brilliant tropical fish or above a heavenly sunrise. Instead they gazed from the face of a ten-year-old boy sitting on the playground wall of Adams Green Primary School.

It was a steady gaze in those bright blue eyes, a gaze which coolly weighed up the frantic game of playground footy the

boy was watching. Oshie Black had never seen these boys before, nor the girls who hopscotched nearby.

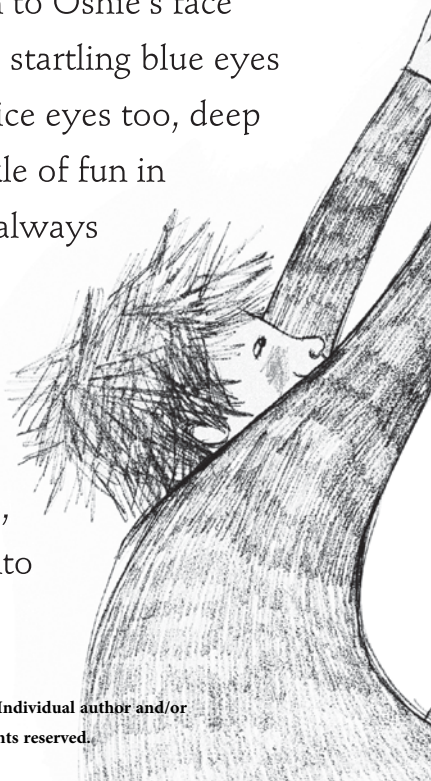
Jenna Reece *had* to know who he was. “Are you new?” she asked, marching boldly up to him.

Oshie turned his head away and avoided her eyes. He was shy. Jenna liked that.

“No,” he replied. “I’m ten.”

Jenna got his joke straight away and laughed. A smile crept on to Oshie’s face and, just for a second, his startling blue eyes glanced at her. She had nice eyes too, deep brown ones with a twinkle of fun in them. It was as if they’d always known each other.

Just at that moment, the football came flying straight at Oshie. He caught it with sure hands, then flung it up, up, up into





the sky with amazing force. The boys watched in admiration. Fred Bowen decided it was time to get to know this new boy.

“Want a game?” he asked.

A frown came on to Oshie’s face. He shook his head.

“Come on!” said Fred. “If you’re any good you can play for the school.”

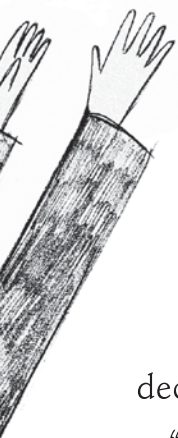
Adams Green Primary had a big game coming up – a cup semi-final – and Fred, the captain, was desperate for some more talent.

“Come on!” said the other boys. They’d decided they liked the look of Oshie.

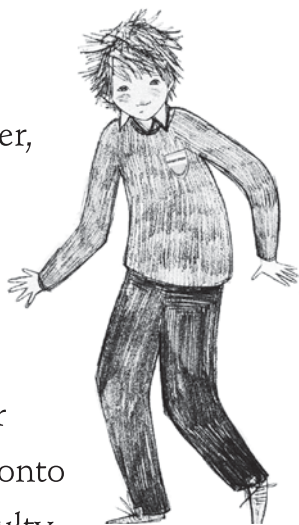
“I’ll play,” volunteered Jenna.

“It’s a boys’ game,” said Fred.

“It’s a boys’ game,” mocked Jenna, in a silly baby voice.



The boys were still waiting for Oshie. He clambered down from the wall, but as he began to walk towards them it became obvious that something was wrong. Oshie walked with a hobble, his knees tight together, his right foot rising onto his toes and scraping the ground. It was funny, but also scary. Oshie could barely run at all, and as he lunged for the ball he span and dropped onto his backside. Only with difficulty



could he turn on to one hand and push himself up again.



At first the boys were transfixed. They stared at Oshie's struggle with the simplest movements, not sure how to react. Should they try to help him?

Should they ignore him? Why had they asked him to play?

It was Fred who'd asked him first, and now he felt stupid, and that made him angry.

"Why do you run like a puppet?" he suddenly asked.

Oshie hobbled round to face Fred. A look as hard as sapphire was in his eyes.

"Why do you talk like a muppet?" he replied.

Fred decided he didn't like this new boy. How dare he call Fred a name when he couldn't even walk properly?

"Just go and sit on your wall," he said.

No one disagreed. The Schools Cup semi-final was coming up fast and they didn't need the likes of Oshie getting in the way.



If Oshie was upset by Fred's comment he didn't show it. Once he was seated in class, equal to everybody else, it didn't take him long to settle in. Miss Rees was first to get the Oshie treatment.

"What came after the Bronze Age?" asked Miss Rees.

Oshie's hand shot up.

"Yes, Osian?" said Miss Rees.

"The Soss Age," replied Oshie.

"That's not a sensible answer, is it, Osian?" said Miss Rees.

"No, miss," replied Oshie.

"Shall we try being sensible?"

suggested Miss Rees.

"OK, miss," replied Oshie.

"What came after the Bronze Age?" asked Miss Rees.

"The Cab Age," replied Oshie.

With his shining eyes and cheeky smile, Oshie was



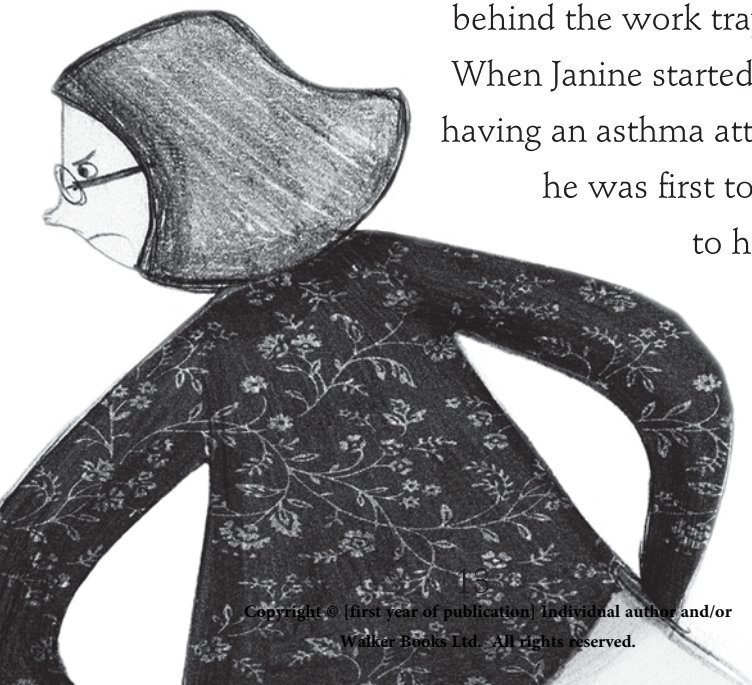


quickly a hit with the girls. Most of the boys were taking to him as well. But after each lesson he'd struggle to his feet, and suddenly he was Oshie the "spaz", Oshie who couldn't play football, Oshie who'd never be part of the gang.

Jenna couldn't stop watching Oshie. It wasn't just that his eyes were so blue and his lashes so long, it was the way he viewed everything – so cool, yet so alert. Oshie never missed a trick. When Miss Rees lost

her board marker he knew it was behind the work trays.

When Janine started having an asthma attack he was first to try to help.



Jenna had to know more about Oshie. As they collected their coats at the end of the day she sought him out.

“What is wrong with your legs?” asked Jenna.

“Cerebral palsy,” answered Oshie. “Want a lychee?”

“What’s that?” asked Jenna.

“A fruit,” replied Oshie.

“No, cerebral thingy, what is it?”

“Damage in my brain,” replied Oshie.

“But you’re not stupid,” said Jenna.

“It’s not that part of my brain,” said Oshie.

“Have you always had it?” asked Jenna.

“Yes,” replied Oshie. “Want a lychee?”

“OK,” said Jenna.

Oshie peeled the papery outer shell from a lychee and handed Jenna the pale glossy flesh. “Don’t eat the stone,” he advised.





Jenna tasted the lychee. It was sweet, with a perfumed taste, kind of wrong, kind of delicious.

“Why won’t the boys let you play football?” asked Oshie.

“I’m too good,” replied Jenna.

“How can you be too good?” asked Oshie.

“I always get the ball off them,” replied Jenna.

“Ah,” said Oshie. “They don’t like it.”

“They say I cheat,” said Jenna. “But I just tackle hard.”

Oshie’s blue eyes narrowed. He liked Jenna but she was a mouthy type and he didn’t know if he could trust what she said. “The boys don’t pick the school team,” he said.

Jenna understood what Oshie was driving at. “Mr Wilkes doesn’t pick me ’cos he doesn’t want to upset the boys,” she said.

“In that case,” said Oshie, “he’s an idiot.”

“He’s useless,” replied Jenna. “He only coaches the team ’cos there’s no other men teachers.”

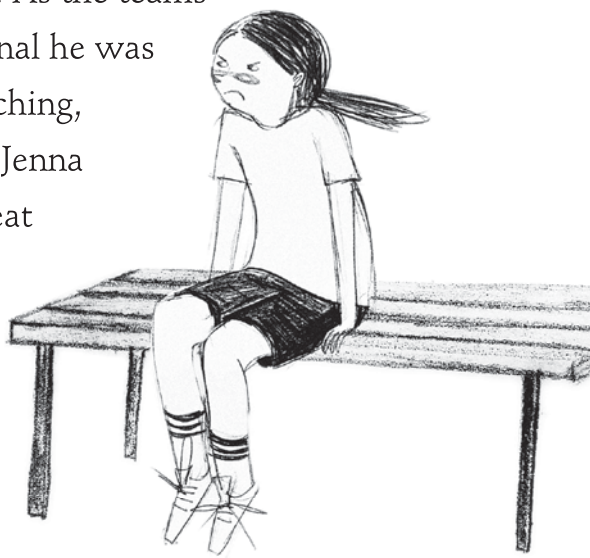
Oshie looked thoughtful, but whatever he was thinking, he didn’t say.

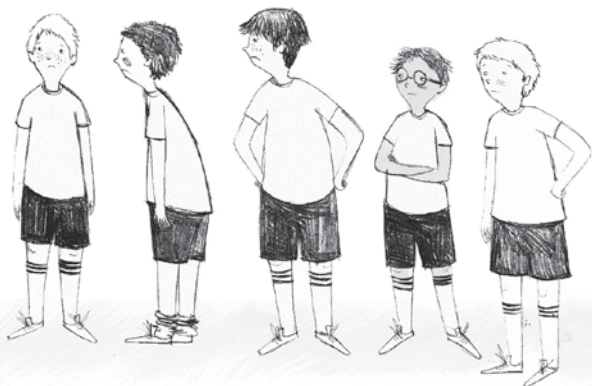
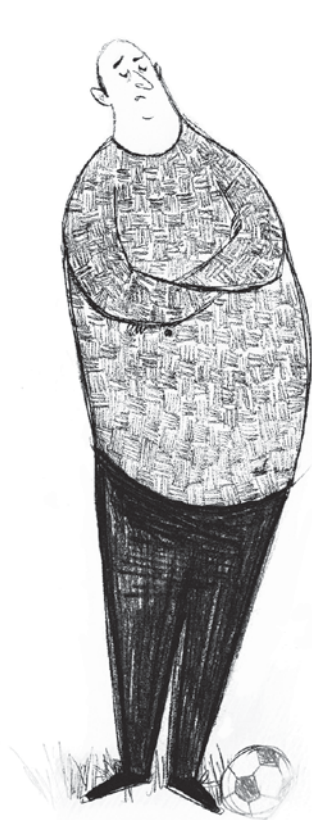
The day of the semi-final drew closer, and the closer it got, the more scared the boys became. Everyone knew Adams Green Primary had been lucky to get so far. They’d had a good draw, played some weak teams and even got a bye in the quarter finals because Gladstone Primary had been closed down before the game. Now, however, they were up against Rushwood Primary, the best team in the local division, unbeaten all year. Rushwood had five players in the county junior team, whereas Adams Green Primary only had Dylan Evans, or David Beckham, as he preferred to be known.

When the big day came, and the team

was announced, they'd just about thought themselves out of any chance of winning. Mr Wilkes didn't help, constantly telling them they'd done well to get this far, and shouldn't be too disappointed if they got hammered. "Life isn't just about winning," Mr Wilkes liked to say.

Oshie had watched all of the practices. No one had asked him to be there, but he sat quietly on the sidelines nibbling his lychees, and Mr Wilkes was too embarrassed to ask him to leave. As the teams ran out for the final he was there again, watching, watching, while Jenna took her usual seat on the bench and prepared for another afternoon's frustration.





It was all horribly predictable. By half-time Rushwood were three up, and it could have been seven. The team traipsed back to Mr Wilkes, heads down, and although Mr Wilkes told them there was plenty of time to fight back, he didn't give the team any idea of how they might actually do it.

Oshie's impatience grew as he listened to the team talk. At last he could stand it no more.





“Mr Wilkes,” he said. “Can I say something?”

“Go on, what is it?” said Mr Wilkes impatiently.

“They’ve got their slowest player at left-back and we’re not testing him at all,” said Oshie. “Our fastest man’s Lewis and he’s in the centre of the park. If we put him out on the right he’ll skin that wing-back.”

No one was sure what to say.

“What do you think, Lewis?” asked Mr Wilkes.

“I was thinking that,” said Lewis.

“You’ve obviously got an eye for the game, Oshie,” said Mr Wilkes.

“I’ve watched a lot of football,” replied Oshie. With that, he hobbled round till he was facing the whole team. “Now I’ll tell you what else we’re doing wrong,” he said.

“You’re not the coach!” said Fred.

“No, let him speak,” said Lewis, and others agreed.

Oshie's eyes were as sharp as glass.  
"We're too static," he said. "People are passing the ball, then just watching. We've got to give and go. Pass and move. Find the spaces, make ourselves available."

"I was thinking that," said Dylan.

"And as for you," said Oshie, "you want to spray the ball around like Beckham but you've got to *get* the thing first. You haven't put in a single tackle."

"I have!" said Dylan.

"No, you haven't, Dylan," said Jamie. "I'm doing all the work!"

"Yes, Jamie," said Oshie. "But you're also the reason they've scored three goals."

"Eh?" said Jamie.

"You keep playing them onside," said Oshie. "We've got to get the back line moving up together. Calum, you should be organizing it."

Calum didn't disagree. By now Oshie had

won everyone's respect. He knew what he was talking about.

"Maybe you should make Oshie coach, sir," suggested Lewis.

"I'm not sure I can do that," replied Mr Wilkes.

"Course you can do it, sir!" said Calum.  
"You're a teacher."

"You could be general manager," suggested Jamie.

Surprisingly, Mr Wilkes agreed. The truth was, he could see Adams Green getting stuffed, and the stick he'd take for it.

Full of new purpose, Adams Green went out for the second half. Just as Oshie had predicted, Lewis was soon running rings round Rushwood's left-back. Ten minutes into the half, he got to the byline and sent over a cross which Josh tapped back for Fred to lash into the net.



Now everyone's tails were up. For the next ten minutes all the pressure came from Adams Green Primary. Lewis got through again and put the ball into the penalty area, where a desperate defender sliced it into his own net.

The score was 2–3. Surely now Adams Green could come back to clinch it.

But would they? Rushwood regrouped, pulled their game together and began to dominate again. Out on the touchline, Oshie watched anxiously.

“Warm up, Jenna,” he said.

“You’re putting me on?”  
asked Jenna.

“We’ve got to get more ball,” replied Oshie.

Two minutes later,  
Oshie held up the  
substitute board. Dylan  
Evans’s number was on it.



Dylan's jaw dropped. No one substituted the Adams Green David Beckham!

But no, there was no mistake. Oshie beckoned Dylan off the pitch, clapped him on the back and sent on his secret weapon.

Jenna tore onto the pitch, fuelled by years of frustration. She set about the opposition like a buzzing bluebottle, the kind you swat and swat but can't get rid of. Almost every tackle ended with the ball at Jenna's feet.

She passed it short, quick and simple, always finding her man, and soon the ammunition was being loaded down the right wing again. With the ball coming time and again into the Rushwood penalty area, the chances were sure to come. After a goal-mouth scramble,



the Rushwood goalie palmed it straight to Fred, who bundled home his second goal.

Ten minutes left, and all to play for. Adams Green were starting to flag, but the sight of Oshie hobbling up and down the touchline, urging them on, spurred them into one last effort. Once again Lewis got the ball into the box. Josh got on the end of it and a Rushwood back took his leg.

There was a loud blast on the ref's whistle.

Penalty!

Only one problem. Dylan took the penalties. No one else wanted the responsibility.

"I'll take it," said Jenna.

The boys didn't argue. Jenna had already proved she had guts.





Everyone fell silent.

Jenna lined up the ball, took four confident steps back, then cracked it into the right-hand corner.

It was a good penalty. But the Rushwood goalie had read it. He flung himself to his left and beat the ball out. Quick as a flea, Jenna was onto it, and with a delicate flick, clipped the ball over the goalie and into the net.



Adams Green went into wild celebrations, but Oshie, focused as ever, ordered everyone back into position. The game wasn't over – not for a minute, anyway. Then, at last, the whistle blew on the greatest comeback in the Schools Cup history. Fred brimmed with the joy of victory – suddenly all his bad feelings about Oshie disappeared. The whole team lifted their new coach into the air and carried him around the pitch in triumph. For a short while, Oshie had twenty-two legs, and they all worked perfectly.



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Long after everyone  
had gone, Jenna  
was still packing  
up her kit,  
savouring her  
triumph. As she  
set off for home



she caught sight of Oshie, sitting on a bench  
outside the school gates. His eyes were red.

“Are you all right, Osh?” asked Jenna.

Oshie didn’t reply, because he honestly  
didn’t know why he’d been crying. Maybe it  
was for the footballing legs he’d never have,  
maybe it was because he was accepted now,  
maybe it was neither, or both. Either way,  
he felt better with Jenna there.

“Well done, Jenna,” he said.

“Well done, Oshie,” replied Jenna.

“See you tomorrow then,” said Oshie.

“Can’t avoid you, can I?” said Jenna.

Jenna kept a straight face, but Oshie saw the smile behind it. They went their separate ways, Oshie's right toes scraping their way home, Jenna suddenly aware of all the things in nature that ought to be perfect and weren't, but were beautiful all the same.