



Bul-Boo

My friend Winifred didn't put her hand up today. Not once. She hardly put her *head* up. I kept looking at her sideways, waiting. But nothing. When the bell rang, she slipped out of the classroom as if she had never been there. Like a shadow. I stayed sitting for a while, wondering. Maybe she was having a quiet day. Surely everyone has those? Or maybe she didn't know any answers. No. Not likely.

I felt Madillo patting me on the head, my daily signal that it was time to pack my bag to go home. There is nothing shadow-like or silent about my twin sister, Madillo. I wonder how much Mum and Dad knew about armadillos when they named her after one. Not

very much, I think, because apart from the odd grunt they are peaceful creatures.

“Hey, Bul-Boo, I’m not waiting more than twenty-three seconds for you today ... and two of those have gone already. Now seven... You’re out of time. I’m leaving...”

She danced towards the door, holding her bag on her head.

I followed her. I don’t really like walking home on my own. If Madillo is with me then no one notices me, even though we look the same. She makes more noise than I do. This afternoon she decided to count the number of steps she took ... in Japanese. In our bedroom, on the ceiling above her bed, she has stuck up a chart with the numbers from one to 999,999 in Japanese. When the light is out she shines her torch onto them and counts out loud. That way, she says, they grow in her head during the night – and it is working. But she thinks one million is unlucky, so she has not learnt how to say that.

Winifred and I have been sitting next to each other in class for two years now. Our teacher, Sister Leonisa, doesn’t like change, and all the time we’ve been in her class no one has ever moved seats. She kept a dead pot plant on the windowsill for a whole term once because she didn’t want to move it, so when you sit next to

someone you know that will be it. I think if you died in your seat she probably wouldn't move you. But I suppose your parents would when they heard.

Winifred is the same age as me, except I was born in the wet season and her birthday is in the dry season. She is short and neat and the tidiest (and cleverest) person in our class. On her side of the desk there is hardly anything to be seen, a fact that Sister always points out to me. As if I couldn't see it for myself.

"Look, Bul-Boo," she says, "can you see any pencil shavings on Winifred's side of the desk? Any ugly bits of paper? Any pens leaking all over the place? Anything at all except the things that have to be there, the things that have no option?"

"No, Sister," I always reply.

If I was Madillo, I might say, "Yes, Sister, because I see all ... even that which isn't there," and see what she'd say to that. But I'm not, so I won't. However, I do wonder why she keeps asking me when it clearly makes no difference. And Winifred doesn't mind, even when I spill over onto her side. She tells me that at home there is no room to be messy. I've never thought about it like that, but it makes sense: if you're messy in a small space then you can't move.

I always think that Winifred doesn't mind about anything: she never gets cross or mad like Madillo does.

But maybe I'm wrong. She was minding about something today.

We normally walk halfway home with her, then we go left and she goes right – and it takes us ages because we always have so much to talk about. Winifred is almost as good at telling stories as Ifwafwa is, and sometimes (if we can stop Madillo counting) she tells us some on the way home. The only time we are ever in a hurry is when the rain comes. None of us mind the rain but we hate lightning. Today Winifred didn't tell a story; she didn't even laugh when Madillo fell down (as she does most days), she just carried on walking with her head down. I wondered if I'd said something to upset her but I didn't want to ask, her face was so closed.

We took much longer than usual to get home after we had split from Winifred, because Madillo reached 362 steps and then made a mistake. Even though I told her where she had got to, she didn't believe me and had to start again. When it comes to numbers, the only person she trusts is herself.

As it turned out, it was lucky she did go back because we met Ifwafwa, the Snake Man – and if we'd gone straight home we might have missed him. He promised to come by tomorrow, as he has a new story.



Ifwafwa

Ifwafwa. Yes, that's what they call me. The Puff Adder. Slow and heavy, but fast to strike. The little one, Bul-Boo, she told me about that name. It's a nickname, she said, because you catch all the snakes and because your bicycle makes that noise, *fwa-fwa-fwa*. Then she asked me, "Why do you put those little bits of orange plastic on your wheel spokes, Mr Snake Man?" She's full of respect, a serious child. She wants to know everything. I think that life will be kind to her.

I told her that the plastic is to warn the snakes that I'm coming and that they should pack their bags and say their goodbyes because they'll be moving out. She liked that. She has a laugh that is so loud it is hard to

believe it comes out of such a small child.

I put the plastic there because I like the sound it makes. It keeps me awake when I ride my bicycle. When the sun is hot and I'm travelling a long straight road, it is easy for me to fall asleep. Especially if I'm hungry for food. But not any more. The *fwa-fwa-fwa* makes me think about different things. When I think, I stay awake.

Today I thought about Nsanguni, the snake of all snakes. She is so long that if you stood at her head you could not see her tail. She is not a snake for catching.

Nsanguni is from the water. Her home is the river. It is always wise to keep your distance from her. It is the shadow she wants: your shadow. At night time you are safe because your shadow is missing, but when the sun shines and your shadow lies on the ground, helpless, Nsanguni takes it. Swallows it whole. As it travels down her long body, it takes you with it and you follow because you are nobody without your shadow. Then you are gone. Dead. Lost in her body.

One day, maybe, she'll get tired and full and spit all the shadows out onto the riverbank. There will be much rejoicing when that day comes.