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opening extract from

Encore Grace

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Grace and the New Girl

"Guess what!" said Aimee. "We're getting a new girl in our class."

"Never!" said Grace, her imagination already working overtime.

For as long as she could remember, Grace's group of friends from school had been the same. Aimee was her best friend – they had known each other since kindergarten and their mums were friends too. Then there was Maria, who had joined their class in Year One and had so many brothers and sisters that she liked coming to play with Grace because she was an "only".

"Not that I'm really an only," thought Grace. "I have Neneh and Bakary." They were her half-sister and half-brother, but they lived in Africa with Grace's papa and his second wife Jatou. Grace didn't know them very well, but once a month she got a letter from

The Gambia and Neneh and Bakary put in a picture or a note for her. And every week her papa phoned her up and they had a talk about all their news.

Aimee and Maria were like sisters to Grace and she had two friends who were like brothers. They were Kester and Raj. They were both in her class at school. Kester was the biggest boy in the class, but he was gentle and kind too, though he didn't let everyone see it. And Raj didn't use to be Grace's friend at all until they were both in the play *Peter Pan*.

The "gang", as they called themselves, had become even closer over the summer when they were the ones who didn't go away on holidays. They all met in Grace's garden every day and made up adventures. Grace's nana helped them.

There were lots of other children in their school class, of course, and they were friends with some of them too. There was La Tasha, who was big and jolly and fun to be with. And there were George and Jason and Julio, who the boys played football with. The girls preferred netball.

There were other children they didn't get on so well with. Natalie, for example, who was a bit jealous of Grace's popularity, and Russell, who was a bully. But the five friends didn't have much to do with them.

"I wonder if the new girl will be a friend," said Grace, "or someone to steer clear of."

But Aimee didn't know anything about her, only that she was starting after half term. Her mum had heard it from Jason's mum, whose next-door neighbour was a first cousin of the new girl's dad.

In the first half of term, Grace's gang had spent a great two weeks being extras in the musical of *Annie* in a real theatre with lots of people. Then it was half term and the gang felt a bit flat. After all the excitement of being in a real show in a real theatre, they thought the rest of the term would be dull. The new girl was the only thing they had to look forward to.

"I hope she plays football," said Kester.

"I hope she hasn't already got a best friend," said Maria. She was very happy in Grace's gang but she had always wanted to be someone's best friend, the way Aimee was Grace's.

"We'll have the Christmas play this term too," said Grace quickly. "I wonder what it will be this time?"

But when they got back to school, there were two surprises on the first day.

The new girl was called Crishell. She was very pretty, with black curly hair, very long eyelashes and a beautiful smile. But she didn't show it often, because she wasn't at all friendly. In fact, she seemed a bit stuck-up.

Then, after she had introduced the new girl to them, their teacher, Ms Woollacott, said, "I've decided that this year the class Christmas play will be – *Sleeping Beauty!*"

A few girls squealed, but Grace's gang looked at one another in horror. There were only three decent parts in the story of *Sleeping Beauty* and two of them were what Kester called "wet".

"Bags I be Wicked Fairy," said Grace.

"Well, no one would cast you as Beauty," said Natalie, shaking her blond curls.

Grace didn't care, though she was glad when Aimee said, "How rude!" Grace didn't want to be someone who lay sleeping, waiting for

a handsome prince to wake her up before her life could begin. She wanted to be someone who made things happen.

"Who do you think will be the prince?" whispered Maria.

"Kester," Raj whispered back, and that gave them all the giggles.

"Settle down," said Ms Woollacott. "And there's no need to roll your eyes, Kester. This is going to be no ordinary fairy tale. For a start, I want you to write your own version. We'll start with the gifts that the fairies give at the princess's christening. I want you all to make a list of the best things the baby could have. And the fairies can be boys or girls. Jason, please don't pull faces. You can make them superheroes if you want."

It was a most interesting class. They ended up with a list of christening guests and gifts that looked like this:

Glamour Fairy: Beauty (this came from Natalie and her group of special friends)

Superman: Superhuman strength (This was Kester's)

Fairy of friendship: Making friends (Maria's)

David Beckham: Football skills (from Jason and Julio and lots of the boys)

Madonna: Being able to sing and dance (Aimee's)

Cheerful Fairy: Happiness (La Tasha's)

Gold Fairy: Lots of money (from George and most of the class)

Tale Fairy: Being able to tell stories (Grace's)

Muse: Creativity (Crishell's)

"How many can we have?" asked Natalie.

"As many as we all agree on," said Ms Woollacott. "But remember, if Beauty has been given a special gift, she'll have to use it during the play. And don't forget we have to have the Bad Fairy and the Good Fairy too."

It was clear that this was going to be a much more interesting play than the children had first thought, with much more appealing parts. They were now competing to play Madonna and Becks and Superman and there was a lot of excited chatter.

Grace was unusually quiet. She kept looking at Crishell. The new girl had come up with an idea that Grace wished she had thought of and a word Grace didn't know. Crishell had explained to the class that a "muse" was a source of inspiration and that the ancient Greeks had nine of them, one for dancing, one for history, and so on.

"That's a wonderful idea, Crishell," Ms Woollacott had said. "I can see you're going to be a great asset to the class."

Grace was used to being the one in class who came up with that sort of idea. And although she had been in Ms Woollacott's class for only a few weeks, she was used to being the one whose ideas were praised. A horrible feeling was beginning to gnaw at her stomach.

By the time Nana came to meet her at the school gates, Grace was in a thoroughly bad mood. She scuffed her shoes through all the fallen leaves on her way home and didn't answer when Nana asked her how her day had been. But Nana knew Grace very well and she knew that the whole story would come out in her own good time. As they cut up carrots



together in the kitchen, Nana asked casually, "How was the new girl?"

"Awful," said Grace, savagely chopping her carrot. "I hate her."

"Really?" said Nana. "Is she so horrible, then? Is she rude to the teacher? Mean to the children? Unkind to the class rabbit?"

Grace's lips twitched. "No, none of that. But she's a show-off and she thinks she's too good for the rest of us."

"Ah," said Nana. "Maybe she's shy."

"No," said Grace. "She was full of ideas today and Ms Woollacott thinks she's the bee's knees."

Nana changed the subject then but later that evening, when Grace was supposed to be asleep, she heard Nana and Ma talking.

"I think Grace's nose has been put out of joint, Ava," Nana said. "This new girl is stealing her thunder."

Next morning, Grace looked hard at her nose in the mirror. Was it perhaps not quite as straight as it used to be?

She was not sure where she kept her thunder, but over the next few days she

certainly felt her supply of it getting smaller, while Crishell's grew.

The play of Sleeping Beauty was now cast. After fierce competition, which didn't include Grace, Natalie was chosen to be the heroine. Her best friend Daisy was to be the Glamour Fairy. Kester was Superman and Raj was David Beckham. Maria was the Friendship Fairy. A girl called Bonnie was the Good Fairy and Grace was the Wicked one – though she wouldn't have minded being the Tale Fairy.

"No," said Ms Woollacott. "You were much the scariest Wicked Fairy, Grace." And she made Jason the Tale Fairy, though she agreed he could change his name to the Story Dude. Julio was the Prince and got teased a lot about having to kiss Natalie.

La Tasha was Madonna and Aimee was the Cheerful Fairy, even though they had suggested them the other way round. And Crishell was the Muse of Creativity. What with the king and queen and the herald and all the courtiers, everyone had a part.

"Now," said Ms Woollacott. "Who's going to write the play? You'll all have to contribute

ideas, but we need one or two people to write them down and organise them into proper scenes."

Now Grace wanted to write the play more than she wanted a part. She raised her hand, thinking she would burst if Ms Woollacott didn't choose her. But what was this? No one else had their hand up except the new girl.

"Excellent," said Ms Woollacott, before Grace could change her mind and put her hand down. "Grace and Crishell will make excellent writers for us. Now, let's get to work."

Grace touched her nose. It definitely felt very crooked.