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Opening extract from

Ruby Rogers: Who Are You Looking At?

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CHAPTER 1

Oh my God! It's a fight!

'SO, RUBY?' Mrs Jenkins stared at me. My mind went blank. I panicked. I felt myself go red. 'Oh, never mind,' she said, as if I was some kind of idiot. 'Yasmin?'

'Miss, I want to be a fashion designer. And I'll have shows in aid of the rainforest and things.'

'Good. Anybody else? – Dan?'

'I'm going to design cars, miss, that don't emit nasty gases.' Crumbs! Froggo was such a brainbox! My friends were all so switched on, but I didn't have a clue. I was like an electric light bulb that

has gone phizz-phut and turned dark and tinkly.

I racked my brains. What was I going to be? I had to think of something. Jenko would ask me again in a minute. I couldn't think of any jobs at all – except being a teacher (my dad) or a midwife (my mum). If Jenko picked on me again, I'd say I was going to be a nurse. But how would that help to stop climate change? Jenko won't be satisfied until her whole class is saving the planet.

'Leo?' said Mrs Jenkins. Leo is the new boy in our class. His first day was yesterday. He's tall (almost as tall as Max) and he's got long black hair. Some of it's slicked back and some falls across his face. He's got big brown eyes, and yesterday, when



we were doing our get-to-know-you stuff, sitting in a circle, he had a cool kind of look on his face, as if he didn't care that we were looking at him.

Leo said he wanted to be a DJ, which wasn't anything to do with the environment as far as I could see.

'How could that help the environment?' asked Jenko. Leo frowned and smoothed his hair back. 'Anybody?' she went on.

'Please, miss, Leo could tell people about recycling schemes and things!' said Froggo.

'And make appeals for money for the rainforests and stuff!' added Toby.

'Exactly!' said Jenko. 'Leo would be in a wonderful position to influence the way people think about things, to spread important ideas, wouldn't he?' Leo blushed slightly and looked a bit surprised that his choice of job had turned out to be so eco-friendly.

I felt sorry for him. It's horrible being new. I remembered when Lauren was new, nobody would speak to her for a while because she looked weird. I only looked after her because Mrs Jenkins told me to. But once I got to know her, of course, she was really nice and rewarded me with trips to her divine farm, where I cuddled lots of cute baby

animals, including her small brothers and sister.

'So,' Mrs Jenkins went on. 'Who's next? – Max? Have you got any plans for your future career?'

'Miss, I want to be an architect.'

'Ah, now that's a very important line of work, isn't it? Who can tell me why?'

Max rambled on for a bit about the houses he was going to build having solar panels and stuff. We'd learned about solar panels last week, so that was easy.

Yasmin waited until Mrs Jenkins wasn't looking, and then whispered, 'Isn't Leo a *babe*?' I think she'd been impressed by the idea of him as the DJ who saved the world. I ignored her. I get a bit embarrassed when she says things like that.

It was Lauren's turn to talk about her possible future career. She wants to run a riding stable. Everybody thought this would be very good for the environment, because it would give people the chance to take exercise in the fresh air. But nobody mentioned about horses farting.

Joe told me once about cows and sheep burping and farting. Apparently it's one of the causes of global warming. And if the animals are causing all that damage, what about us? Especially my

brother Joe. He set fire to his once. I laughed so much I cried. If Mrs Jenkins asked me again what I was going to do with my life, and how I would do my bit to combat climate change, I would be so tempted to say, *Please miss, I'm going to stop burping and farting.*

'Ruby? What's so funny?'

My blood froze. 'Nothing, sorry.'

'What are you smirking at? What's so amusing? We're trying to have a serious discussion.'

'Sorry, Mrs Jenkins.'

'So what are you going to do with your life, Ruby Rogers? Have you had any ideas yet?'

I panicked again. My mind went so blank for a split second I didn't even see in colours. Everything went black and white.

'Ruby's going to be a gangster!' said Froggo.

Everybody laughed – except Mrs Jenkins.

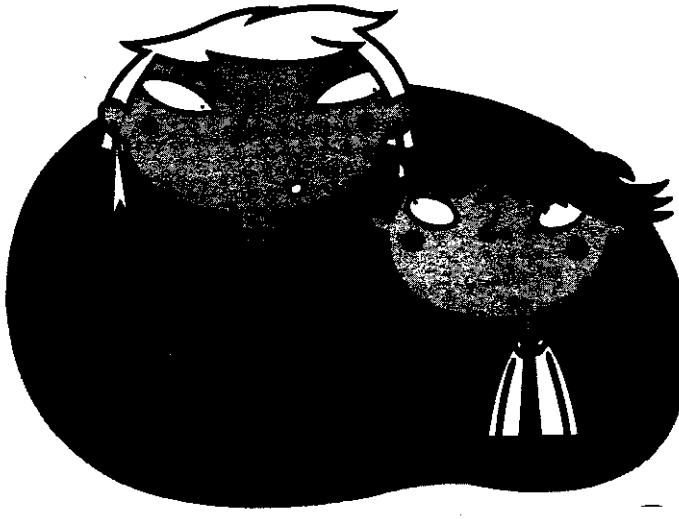
'A gangster, is it, Ruby?' she demanded, folding her arms and glaring. Sometimes I don't think she likes me *at all.*

I do have a kind of daydream that I will be a gangster. I'd live in the trees with my gang, who would be a mixture of monkeys and people, and we'd rob the rich and give the money to poor people. And poor monkeys. But it all sounded

totally stupid compared to my friends' plans. They were so mature and *realistic*.

'Please, miss, I want to be a teacher!' I said. It was a total lie, of course. Mrs Jenkins gave me a bad-tempered look. She probably thought I'd only said that to suck up to her. But really I'd only said that because it was the one thing I could think of. I could never be a nurse, because I don't like the sight of blood. I don't think I'd mind so much if it was green.

'You'll have to buck your ideas up if you want to be a teacher!' said Mrs Jenkins with the hint of a sneer. 'It takes a lot of dedication and focus and



hard work, and let's face it, Ruby, you're a bit of a dreamer, aren't you?'

I nodded. She was right, actually. I am a bit of a dreamer. I dreamed last night I was a sardine.

Mrs Jenkins moved on. She'd obviously decided she wasn't going to get much more out of me. It seemed that everybody in my class was headed for what Mrs Jenkins called 'rewarding and meaningful work' – except me.

I was amazed at how everybody had been thinking about their future and making plans, while I had just been staring into space and dreaming I was a sardine.

At lunchtime Yasmin grabbed me and Hannah. She would have grabbed Lauren too if she'd had three arms.

'Listen!' she hissed. 'I've had a brilliant idea! We can form a gang and have a secret plan!'

'Sounds OK to me,' I replied. I love secret plans, in fact I try to have at least one on the go at all times.

'Oh, great!' said Lauren. 'Like the Famous Five?'

'We'll be the Fabulous Four!' whispered Yasmin. 'Are you up for it, Hannah?'

'I *so* am!' breathed Hannah. 'What's the secret plan?'

'I'll tell you the plan once we've made our solemn vow,' said Yasmin. 'Normally we'd prick our fingers and mix our blood, but as we're at school we'll have to make do with spit.'

'How?' asked Lauren, looking worried.

'We spit in one another's hands and then shake hands,' said Yasmin.

'Urghhhhh!' said Hannah. 'We'll have to do it in the cloakrooms, then, and wash our hands straight away afterwards.'

We went to the girls' loos, spat in each other's hands (screaming horribly the whole time) and then shook hands all round. Then we washed our hands.

'OK,' said Hannah. 'So now we're the Fabulous Four, what's the secret plan?'

'We're going to capture Leo,' said Yasmin proudly, as if it was a brilliant idea instead of a load of complete twaddle.

'Capture?' Lauren looked worried again. 'What do you mean? ***Kidnap?***' She wrinkled her nose.

'Not ***kidnap***, you muppet!' said Yasmin, laughing. 'I mean, make sure he's our best friend. Make him adore us. Make him think we're the coolest people on the planet. Make him, like, totally ***in lurve*** with us!'

Hannah jumped up and down and clapped her hands. 'Yessss!' she said. Lauren raised her eyebrows and gave a nervous little smile. My heart sank. If I'd known how stupid Yasmin's secret plan was going to be, I'd never have joined the gang in the first place.

But what could I do? If I told her what I thought, she'd only get in a strop and have a massive row. Yasmin can sulk for days if necessary. In a couple of days it was going to be our school trip. And we just had to be friends for that – otherwise it would be ruined.

So although I felt really annoyed about it, I tagged along when a gang of us gathered around Leo, to be friendly, or (in Yasmin's case) to launch her secret plan to sweep him off his feet and make him her own for ever.

He wasn't really shy – far from it.

'Your teacher is, like, an alien,' he said with a sly grin.

'You're so right!' yelled Yasmin. 'I always thought there was something weird about her! I love aliens! Which are your favourites?'

I love Yasmin, but I don't like it when she goes a bit over the top and tries to impress people. Everybody started swapping alien stories until the

bell went for afternoon school. The louder Yasmin got, the more silent I became. But I quite like being silent. Even if some people do think I'm a loser compared to her.

However, I'm not a total loser, because I have a teenage friend, glamorous goth legend Holly Helvellyn, and she walked home with me after school. She's often passing our school at home time because she's been working in the art room of Ashcroft School. Holly's leaving at the end of this term, though, and going to art college. In fact she's sort of left already, but she keeps going back to use the art room – all the paints and stuff.

'So how was your day, Ruby?' she asked, peering at me from under the rim of a stylish sunhat. She isn't all that gothic now it's summer, actually – she's lightened up a bit. She was wearing a long white lace dress and pale make-up, which looked very dramatic with her black hair. Her hair used to be red but I like it better dark. I used to wish she and my bro Joe would get together, but I have totally given up on that now.

'My day was horrid,' I said. 'Everybody was telling Mrs Jenkins what they're planning to do when they grow up, and I couldn't think of any-

thing, and I kind of blanked out and felt like a total nerd.'

'Never mind, Ruby!' Holly laughed. 'You can't be a worse nerd than me!'

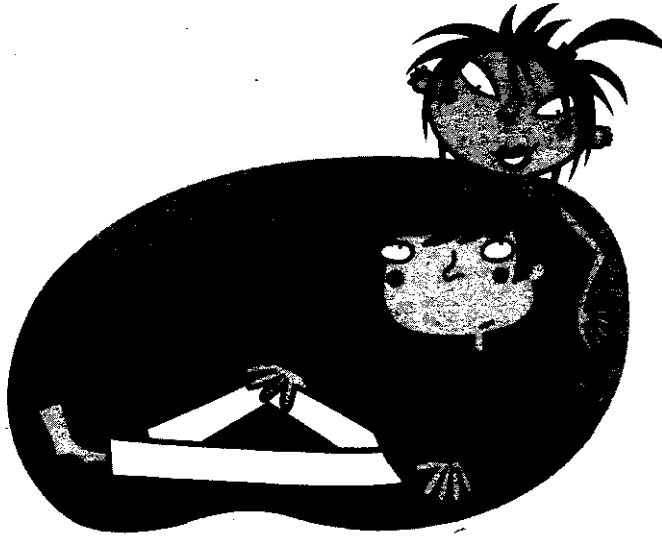
'You're not a nerd!' I shouted. 'You're a legend!'

'Well, maybe I'm a legendary nerd,' said Holly with a grin. 'Shall we go to the Dolphin Cafe for a quick drink?'

'Great idea!' I grinned. I was feeling much better now. Holly would help me to think of a career. She is so brilliant.

I texted my mum to tell her where I was going, and then we began to plan what we'd have at the Dolphin. But when we got there, there was a nasty noise coming from inside. It was a kind of yelling and banging. Not gunfire kind of banging, more like furniture falling over. Then a couple of boys burst out of the door, pulling each other's clothes about.

'Oh my God!' said Holly. 'It's a fight. Come away, Ruby!' She grabbed my hand and ran off down the road. Once we'd turned the corner and we were safe, she stopped running. 'Toby Wallace and his stupid gang!' she sighed, shaking her head. 'They're such idiots.'



CHAPTER 2

What are you laughting at?

IT WAS DISAPPOINTING that the stupid gang had ruined our plans for tea in the Dolphin Cafe. We didn't talk much as we walked home. Holly seemed to be thinking of something else. When we got to my house I invited her in. There was a horrible noise of TV violence in the sitting room. We went in there. Joe was sprawled on the sofa and his socks smelt like a major environmental disaster.

'Hi, Rogers,' said Holly casually. 'Getting your usual violence fix?'