



2019 Longlist

A Secondary School Education

by

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A Secondary School Education

I. 2002-2004

I can't tell the story about my fight with Harry Reading without explaining my secondary school and the relationship with my first best friend. His name was Tom and he was a white boy from East London, innit.

Trust me bruv when I say I went to the blackest secondary school in East London. I am not even exaggerating, innit. White people at my school were the ethnic minorities; the endangered species.

The Cockney boys of East End had mostly been replaced by Africans, Jamaicans, and Indians. My secondary school was basically a multicultural soup of the spicy variety. If you were a teacher who couldn't handle hot soup, then you were well and truly fucked.

When I started secondary school in 2003, I was a thirteen-year-old black boy. Or, if you wanna be fucking pedantic, I was British Nigerian. These times, I was an innocent-eyed youth who enjoyed reading comics, books and daydreaming about the fantastical worlds constructing themselves within my bat-shit crazy imagination.

At this point in my school life, everyone in my year still played with each other. We were innocent enough to still be mostly colour blind. So, it was not surprising to me that Tom and I became close friends throughout Year 7 and Year 8.

I had been sitting in an English class, one of my favourite lessons because I fancied the teacher innit, when Tom first came to sit next to me. I examined him. Tom was a proper English lad, innit. He had a mop of untidy, brown hair, freckles dotted all over his pasty face like someone had a million snipers trained on his head, and a slight cockney accent.

On a surface level, we couldn't be any more bloody different, me and Tom. But what brought us close together was our passion for making up stories. Yeah, Tom and I were both possessed by our imaginations.

"Bruv, this story is gonna be so sick," Tom said, as he walked beside me one day during playtime. We were trotting through the loud and frantic playground together, lost in our shared excitement about our new story.

"Like our hero is gonna be trapped in this big maze, innit. There's gonna be monsters and other crazy shit."

"But he needs a partner," I said as I stroked my hairless chin. "Like the hero needs a sidekick or something. It's gonna be boring if it's just him in the maze."

"Yeah, you're right, innit. The hero always gotta have someone who's gonna have his back. They could be brothers, like Del Boy and Rodney."

"Who's Del Boy and Rodney?" I said. Sometimes Tom would say things that left me scratching my head. In my Nigerian household, I didn't watch a lot of British television, so I didn't really know any British popular culture references, innit. I would come to understand British culture as I got older though.

"You're joking, mate. Only Fools and Horses, innit. Oi, you proper need to watch that. It's a bare funny."

Before everything changed, I remember one of the last, good memories myself and Tom shared as friends in 2004.

It was after school. Tom and I were waiting at the Beckton DLR station. My annoying young brother, Seun, had decided to tag along with us.

"Fucking hell, mate. You were touching her leg," Tom said, with the tone of a man impressed by a great feat.

"Yeah man," I replied, feeling a little weird about my first experience of rubbing my hands against a girl's thigh throughout Science class. "Mate, she was even smiling at me when I was doing it."

"I should tell mummy what you been doing," Seun said, with a cheeky grin.

"Shut up, man," I said, giving my brother a fierce glare. "You're such a neek, innit."

"So what?" Tom said. He had a wide, mischievous smile across his face like a Cheshire cat. "Are you going to go out with her?"

"I don't know, innit. Girls are fucking long, bruv."

As I said this, the girl question came sauntering up the steps of the DLR train station. Her name was Nina, and she was a black French girl with a fierce temper but a wicked backside. There was no denying that Nina was proper fit. If male puberty was a square box filled with a dozen confusing switches, then Nina had flicked my horny switch for sure.

I could hear Tom giggling as Nina came to a stop in front of me. Her full, pink lips formed into a naughty smirk which just made my heart do a backflip. Down below, my permanently attached friend currently hidden in my boxer shorts was starting to harden. Throughout all this, Tom was chuckling his head off while my younger brother stood at the train platform looking like a confused puppy.

"Come to the vending machine," Nina said, those dark brown eyes fixed on me.

I didn't object and followed her to the vending machine. Within minutes, we were in each other's mouth, and my hands were all over her backside. This was when I became sexual for the first time.

Even as I sloppily kissed Nina and squeezed her bum cheeks, I could still hear Tom snickering by the train platform.

"You had a boner, don't lie, bruv," Tom said to me twenty minutes later as we sat down opposite each other on the metal seats inside the DLR train.

"Ewww," Seun said, sitting next to me with a furrowed brow.

"Shut up, man," I said, directing my unusual mixture of embarrassment and newly found self-confidence to both Tom and my younger brother. "I didn't get a boner, you pricks."

"Yeah you did," Tom said, rolling his head back in laughter. "You're first ever boner, innit."

"Fuck off," I said, smiling to myself even though Tom was taking the piss out of me. To be fair, it had been a nice feeling, snogging Nina like that and I was kind of glad Tom had been there to see me do it.

"You're something else, mate," Tom said.

I wish the friendship between myself and Tom had stayed like how it was that day at the Beckton DLR train station.

But things change.

You start to see colours.

II. 2005-2006

Harry Reading was a right prick. He was a 15-year old white boy built like a fucking pro-wrestler.

Broad shoulders, six-foot, thick meaty arms and a head that resembled a pasty potato. It didn't matter that he was butters – his imposing figure more than compensated for his less than attractive face.

Among the hierarchy of the few popular white boys at my school, Harry was fucking up there. The Asians guys didn't dare fuck with him. The black boys, who pretty much ruled the playground with their sheer numbers and their "I-don't-give-a-fuck" mentality, stayed clear of Harry for the most part, so long as he didn't intrude on their territory in the playground.

Yet for some fucking reason, despite my better judgement, I had decided to pick a fight with Harry.

Honest to God, I had not been looking for a fight at all. At this point in my life as a 15-year old, I was concerned about three things: 1) achieving good grades so my Dad wouldn't give me a painful, Nigerian ass whopping 2) trying to snog as many pretty girls as I could and 3) writing rap lyrics with my best friends Toby and Carlos. Having a fight with the biggest white boy at school was never an objective, but shit happens, I suppose.

The catalyst that led to the fight between Harry and me happened during Food Technology class.

"Now I want you to add some flour into your bowl of salt and yeast," said Miss Hutchinson, the pretty Food Technology teacher with a small waist, tiny face and a distracting set of boobs.

As I reached for my bag of flour, which my mother had given to me for today's lesson, my eyes were fixed on my bowl of sugar and yeast. So I was surprised when my hand brushed against rough skin instead of my bag of flour.

I turned my head away from the bowl and immediately sighed when I saw who was standing in front of me with their hand placed on top of my flour. It was fucking Harry Reading. He had a big smile across his repulsive face.

"What are you doing?" I said, making sure the tone in my voice was even.

"I want some flour, man. I ain't got any, innit," Harry replied, in his throaty and slightly cockney accent which seemed to belong to someone else older than him.

"Well, this is mine. I don't have a lot of it. Sorry."

"Don't be a dickhead. Give me some flour."

At this point, even though he was acting like an absolute dickhead, I should have just conceded to his demands. But what did I fucking do instead? I retaliated.

"I said no, man. Leave me alone."

Harry's eyes widened in shock as if a rabbit had tried to bite him. Then he furrowed his brow and stuck his chest out. At this moment, I came to my bloody senses and remembered that Harry was not only twice the size of me in mass but also at least a foot and a half taller. And I had just disrespected him. To his face.

"Who you talkin' to bruv?" Harry said through gritted teeth, his white face now turning the colour of raw meat that you might find hanging in the butchers.

Can't lie, at this point, I was fucking cowering now. I couldn't even speak. My words were stuck in a traffic jam of saliva in my oesophagus. All I could do was stare at Harry with a terrified expression, like a deer staring into the oncoming headlights of a car.

"Who the fuck you think you are?" Harry said, each decibel in his voice carrying a threat.

Before I even saw it coming, Harry lunged forward and pushed me back with his broad hands. I stumbled back. Now I should have just let myself fall to the ground and then curled up in the foetal position in a gesture of pathetic surrender.

But something in me stirred, like popping, molten lava and it erupted before I could do anything about it. I lurched forward and pushed Harry square in the chest which sent him falling to the ground, his arms clutching at the air as he fell.

Now I had really fucking done it.

By this point, Miss Hutchinson had stopped teaching the class, and the students had stopped pretending to care. Everyone's eyes were set on me and then on Harry, who was now getting to his feet. His face had gone so red, it looked like it might explode into pieces of meat and bone.

Then Harry took a swing at me. His huge knuckles narrowly missed my chin as I edged away, my feet working on automatic. Just as he was about to have another go at dislocating my jaw, a few boys grabbed his arms and pulled him back. Now Harry was in hysterics, spit spraying from his mouth which landed on my black forehead.

"Watch, innit. Just watch after school, bruv. I am gonna fuck you up."

My heart was beating so fast now, and with such force, it was like it wanted to rip out my fucking chest and run away from me. And I wouldn't blame my organ if it did.

I grabbed the table top, steadying myself and shaking as the adrenaline ran across my body like an overexcited child that would soon tire.

Because I didn't want to give share a bag of fucking flour, I was now going to have to fight Harry Reading. Fuck my life.

News of my impending fight with Harry moved through the corridors and the playground like an electric current, jolting every pupil into an excited frenzy.

You gotta understand innit, this wasn't a typical fight. At my second school, you had the frequent disputes between the hardest black boys since it was always the black boys fighting, to be honest. Or you had some boring fight between two puny kids that no one really gave two fucks about.

But they had rarely been a school fight like the one between Harry and me. Our fight had this kind of David-and-Goliath narrative. A classic underdog story. Think Rocky VS Apollo Creed. Black VS White.

It goes without saying, that I did not share everybody's bloody enthusiasm.

I was sitting at the bottom of the concrete stairwell in one of the school's corridors that led to the science block with my head buried in my hands. Toby, a Yoruba Nigerian boy who was born in London like myself and Carlos, a Portuguese boy from Angola who had moved to London two years ago, were standing on either side of me. Toby on the left and Carlos on the right. My two best friends representing opposing opinions about the fight.

"Man, this is so dumb. You don't have to fight you know," Toby said. I always loved Toby's sense of black-and-white righteousness. A simple understanding of the world not coloured by cynical bullshit. At times, he reminded me of my mum – protective and kind-hearted.

"Nah, bro. You got to fight Harry, innit. You can't be a pussy like that," Carlos said. This opinion was very much in line with Carlos' 'no-fucks-given' attitude, even though he was a quiet boy.

As I sat on the stairwell, hearing but not really listening to Carlos and Toby debate the principles of why I should or shouldn't fight Harry, I could hear footsteps coming towards us. I looked up. Tom and another white boy called Craig were standing in front of us. They were both Harry's best friends.

Seeing Tom standing in front of me sent a jolt through me. I hadn't spoken to Tom for almost three years. I really couldn't explain why Tom and I had stopped being friends. It just happened.

We stopped hanging out after the long summer of 2004. For eight weeks I did not go to school because of some stupid teacher's strike. For eight weeks I never saw Tom. Two months feels like a long time when you're 14.

By the time the strike was over, and all the students returned to school, something had changed in my year. Over the long summer, an innocence had faded away. Everyone in my year used to play together, but now there was a division. Black kids now only hung out with black kids. Asian kids now only hung out with Asian kids. White kids hung out with white kids. This change was never officially spoken about, it just quietly happened. The only time all the boys came together was to play football during break or lunchtime.

Just like that, Tom and I retreated to our respective groups, innit. I became friends with Toby and Carlos. Tom went on to become friends with that fat cunt Harry and another white boy called Craig who desperately looked like he wanted a modelling career when he was older. From Year 9 to Year 11, myself and Tom just stopped speaking to each other. We had chosen our colors.

"After school, behind the playground," Tom said, looking at me with a blank face, the history of our close friendship long since buried.

"Don't flop, innit," Craig added.

I looked at them both, feigning defiance. "I am not a pussy. After school, I'll be there."

I honestly felt like I was recreating the gladiator fights of ancient Rome for rowdy inner-city kids as I

stood in front of Harry at the back of the school. At least two dozen students surrounded us in a semicircle, shouting and screaming with elation as they anticipated a good, bloody scrap.

Within a blink, the fight began. The crowd erupted into a deafening frenzy.

Harry rushed at me with some super fucking speed and force. Inexperienced in the art of playground fighting, I had not prepared myself to dodge. But I didn't fall.

Instead, I grabbed Harry's shoulders, and I was resisting his attempts to fling me on the floor. We were tussling with each other now, trying to topple the other to the ground. I was surprised by my own strength. Here was I, resisting the entire force of Harry's power and weight. Confidence was filling up inside me like air being pumped into a balloon. Maybe all those years of eating my mum's pounded yam and fried plantain had given me Popeye's strength.

But I had allowed too much confidence to fill my head and, like a balloon with too much air, it popped.

Harry flung me to the ground like I was a bloody bag of rice.

Before I could get to my feet, Harry was on top of me and delivering a flurry of blows to my face. Thank God I had the good sense to shield myself with my forearms. Then those years of watching WWF came back to me, and I swiped my ankle to the right with a force that connected with Harry's ankle, tripping him up.

He fell beside me, landing on his back with a thud. I rolled over and was now on top of him. With my eyes closed and screaming at the top of my lungs, I threw wild punches at Harry's face. All around me I could hear the collective roar of the other kids.

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Then Harry broke through my onslaught of blind punches and pushed me back onto the ground again. In an instant, he was on top of me once more, and I felt his punches pouring down on me like hailstones. I was weak now. Fuck it, I was too tired and too sore to continue resisting.

But then the punching stopped. Breathing heavily, I slowly opened my eyes. Harry was now standing on top of me, his face looked swollen as he panted. Tom was standing beside Harry, and then he gave me a concerned look before walking away with the fat bastard in two.

Carlos and Toby rushed to my side and picked me up from the concrete floor. Most of the school's popular black boys ran towards me, shouting things in excited voices but I wasn't listening to their hype.

I watched Harry walk away, flanked by Tom, Craig and a few other white boys that were part of their posse. Why had Tom had looked at me in that way?

Fuck it, who cares anyway. The fight was over.

III. The last day of school

The last of couple months at my secondary school brought about a sense of collective unity. It was like everyone was back in Year 7 and Year 8 again before the division happened. It was a good time.

The playground was buzzing with activity. Year 11 students scurried around wearing graffitied school uniform, asking other students to sign their shirts or jumpers. It was a tradition at my secondary

school that the final year students would get their school uniforms inked by as many students as they could.

My school uniform was pretty much full of ink as I walked with Carlos and Toby through the grass field in the playground. We were looking for any girls who would be willing to ink our white shirts.

"Wait, has anyone got a pen?" Toby asked.

"Nah, not on me. Shit," Carlos said, suddenly looking very worried.

"Chill out, guys," I said. "I've got a few pens in my pencil case. I'll go and get them. I'll be a minute, yeah."

I left Toby and Carlos and made my way back into the school building. As I walked towards the room where I had begun my school day every day for six years, I felt a little melancholic knowing this would be the last time I would walk down these corridors.

When I entered the tutor room, I was proper gobsmacked to find Tom. He was the only person in the classroom. I noticed that his white school shirt was filled with so many scribbles, you could only see patches of the original white shirt. For a moment, me and Tom sort of just stood opposite each other in awkward silence.

"Came to get my pencil case," I said for no other reason than to break the silence between us.

"Just getting another shirt to get inked," Tom said.

I acknowledged Tom's response with a silent nod and walked through the rows of desks towards my school bag. As I bent down to pick up my bag, I could feel Tom's presence in the classroom, and I swear it was like I could hear his brain ticking.

After I pulled out my pencil case from my bag, I made my way towards the exit. Just as I was about to leave, Tom called out my name. I turned to face him.

"What's up?"

Tom had an uncertain look on his face, but he kept his eyes on me. "I was me who told Harry to stop hitting you, innit."

I didn't know how to respond to Tom as I wasn't sure what the hell he was on about it. Thankfully he read the confused expression on my face.

"When you had that fight with Harry at the start of the year, remember? I told him to stop hitting you."

"Oh, thanks," I said, looking at Tom and feeling a little perplexed now. Why was he bloody telling me this on the last day of school?

"Let me sign your shirt, innit," Tom said, stepping forward towards me.

I shrugged my shoulders and took out a felt-tip pen from my pencil case which I gave to Tom. He scribbled something down on the sleeve of my white shirt and then handed the felt-tip pen back to me.

"Take care yourself, bruv," Tom said. He had a slightly sad expression on his freckled face which

made me feel a pang of regret. What would have happened if we hadn't chosen sides and instead remained as friends?

"Yeah, you too, mate," I said and gave Tom a smile.

Tom nodded his head walked out of the classroom, leaving me all alone to contemplate my experience of British secondary school education in East London. All the knowledge I had gained.

The friends I had made and lost. The girls I had snogged. My one fight with Harry. But had I enjoyed it?

With this question still in my mind, I made my way towards the classroom door. Just before I stepped out, I looked at my sleeve to read what Tom had written.

Tom

Your friend and partner

A smile formed on my face. You know what? My secondary school education had been alright.

About the author

Leke Apena

Having graduated from the University of Brighton in 2011 with a degree in English Language and then pursued a whirlwind career in B2B tech PR (it's sexier than it sounds), Leke Apena has decided to write unconventional, challenging and entertaining stories about the modern Black British experience. Why? Because they are not enough well-written stories about complex, funny and multifaceted Black British characters and Leke is on a mission to change that. He hopes to publish his first novel, *A Prophet Who Loved Her* by the end of this year.