

Under Corn-struction

This is not happening! This is NOT happening! I feel all prickly from head to toe—and not because it's a hot day, either. Here I am totally sprawled on the ground with no hope of saving a scrap of dignity or I-meant-to-do-that-ness. Why can't the warm ground split open and swallow me whole?

Maybe if I lie here perfectly still, no one will notice me. No one will notice the girl lying facedown dressed in a tight, itchy, horrible corncob costume!

Yes. I am dressed as a **cob of corn**.

This was not my idea. It's all part of my mom's twisted plan to help me feel welcome here in Marion, Ohio, which happens to be "The Popcorn Capital of the World." My family just moved here one week, six days, and thirteen hours ago because of Dad's job. Mom figured it would be a good idea for me to be a greeter at the town's annual Popcorn Festival. No big deal, *except* I had to dress



from head to toe in bright green and yellow spandex! This is definitely not the best way to make a good impression in a new town. I know I'm feeling sorry for myself. But I should! Nobody else seems to be too bothered by the fact that I was volunteered, without being asked, to be a corny greeter.



When I came home from school earlier today to find the corncob costume lying on the couch, I asked my mom the obvious question, "What is *that*?"

"It's for you to wear when we go to the Popcorn Festival this afternoon," she told me. "I met a new friend today. Her name is Sue Kenworth and she is in charge of the greeters for the festival. One got sick, so she needs someone to fill in for her at one of the entrances. I told her you'd be glad to do it."

It all started to make horrible sense.



"Me?? *I'm* supposed to *wear* it?" My voice had gone so high, I was squealing. But I didn't care. "How am I supposed to get my hair in there?!"

Well, my hair *is* in there. And now, me and my hair can't wait to get out of this suit. I'm **never** gonna forgive Mom for this!



The stiff corn husks made it really difficult to get vertical again. When I finally got up, I ignored all the concerned faces looking at me. My nose is doing that tickly thing it does when I'm about to cry.

Don't you dare cry, I tell myself.

The only thing worse than being stuck in a corn-cob costume at a festival in a new town is bawling your eyes out in a corn-cob costume at a festival in a new town. I clenched my jaw, but one stubborn tear slipped out anyway.

"Well, hello. You must be the new girl in town!" The voice came from a super-smiley lady with lime-green glasses. Her short red hair was sticking out in every direction. On purpose, I think. I pretended to scratch the corner of my eye as I quickly wiped away the tear.

"Thanks for helping out today," she said, squinting in the sun. I assumed she was the woman who got me into this unfortunate comedy. "What's your name again, hon?"

"Yuzi," I answered.

"What?"

"Yuzi," I repeated.

"You're woozy? No wonder, in that getup!" She laughed.

"No. Yuzi," I said, slowly. "*Y-u-z-i*."

"Ohhh, Yoozy! *Wherever* did you get a name like that?" Spiky Red asked, grinning.

I took a deep breath and started to explain. "My full name is Uzoma Ukachi. It's Nigerian. Most people can't

pronounce it, so my nickname is just the first two letters of my first name: *u-z*. And I spell it *Y-u-z-i*. Yuzi."

"Woo! That was a mouthful! I have never been sooo happy to hear someone has a nickname. I'm Sue. No story. Just Sue Kenworth." She stuck out her hand to shake mine, and then laughed like someone had told a funny joke. "It is hot to-day. But that probably doesn't bother you since you're from Africa. I, on the other hand, feel like I'm melting," Sue said, fanning herself with her hand.

People usually assume I can handle any kind of heat because I'm Nigerian. But hot is hot. Besides, I'm wearing a spandex corncob.

"My son's around here someplace," Sue said, looking around. "I'd love for him to meet you."

I tried to stop her. "Oh, no . . . that's okay . . . I don't really . . ."

"I don't see Trevor anywhere. He'll be so sad he missed you," she said with a sigh.

I smiled sympathetically, but inside I was relieved.

"Where are you going to school, Yuzi?" Sue asked.

"Rutherford B. Hayes Middle School."

"Oh, that's perfect! You'll probably run into Trevor there. Maybe you'll be in some of the same classes," Sue said



excitedly. She looked at her watch. "I've got to run. But it was so nice talking to you. See you around, all right?"

I nodded and smiled.

"By the way," she said, winking like we shared a special secret, "you speak very good English." She waved, and then disappeared into the crowd.

I waved back limply. I'm getting used to that weird compliment. So many people I've met think that if I'm African, and my name is African, then English must be difficult for me. But it's not. In my family, we speak to each other a lot in Ibo, a Nigerian language. But of course, when we speak to anyone else, we use English.

I looked around, wondering where my family was. They were probably walking around, visiting different booths, and having a grand time dressed as *people*. I sighed. I hadn't even asked Mrs. Kenworth when my torture would be over. A person can only handle so many hugs from cranky, sticky toddlers.

I heard familiar voices behind me and turned to see my dad, mom, two sisters, and little brother standing there with their hands full of hot, roasted corn on the cob,

GO TO
secretkeepergirl.com
and type in the secret
word "Ibo" to learn
some Ibo!

towering ice cream cones, glistening hot dogs on soft buns, clouds of cotton candy in rainbows of color, and, of course, buckets of buttery popcorn. I grabbed a handful of Dad's popcorn and shoved it into my mouth.

My mom said, "Hello, dear! We just saw Sue and she said you'll be done in about fifteen minutes."

"Good," I said. "I feel like I've been wearing this forever." I still wasn't sure if I planned to forgive my mom and dad for ruining my life by moving me to this literally corny town. I did know the chances were slim that I'd recover from this traumatic start.

"But you look great—and leafy," my six-year-old brother, Ike, said, grinning mischievously. His real name is Ikechukwu, but most people call him Ike so they don't choke on his full name. His tongue was blue from his giant puff of cotton candy.

I rolled my eyes.

"Bye," I said pitifully as they walked away.

There's got to be a way for me to make friends in this new place, but I'm pretty sure it won't happen while I'm wearing *this* outfit.

I tried to make an effort for the last ten minutes. I smiled widely and put up with more hugs. Then, just as





I saw Mrs. Kenworth coming toward me again, my left foot somehow caught my right foot, and—yeah—I was on the ground again.

Lately, it's like my body's not mine. It's as if someone gave me a new collection of muscles and forgot to leave a manual. Mom says I'm going through a major growth spurt, as if moving to a new town isn't enough for me to deal with.



Sue hurriedly helped me up, concerned. "Are you all right, Yuzi?"

"Growth spurt," I mumbled, humiliated yet again. She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

Not wanting to be rude but dying to get out of there, I asked quietly, "Am I done?"

"Absolutely yes. You were a lifesaver. Fantastic job. Thank you so much!" she said. "I'll be by next week to pick up the costume. Are you sure you're all right?"



"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks. See ya." And I stalked off toward our van. Yes, *stalked*. And it's not funny.

I think I'm going to hate this town.





Yuzi's Fake Alarm





An Angry Ostrich

“Two thousand forty-two ostriches. Two thousand forty-three ostriches. Two thousand forty-four ostriches . . .”

This is how I stayed awake Sunday night. I figured that if counting sheep helps a person fall asleep, then maybe counting something else might help me stay awake. I chose ostriches.

If you stay awake for most of the night, it seems to slow down the coming of the next day—which was good for me. But it also gives you a lot of time to think—which was bad for me. By the time my mom came in to wake me up this miserable Monday morning, my head felt like it would explode and my eyeballs were on fire. I lay there, slowly rolling my eyes around. *Ow. Burny.*

Mom came into my room to see if I was awake, and could immediately tell I had not slept well.

“Uzoma, you look so tired. Are you still worried about school today?” Mom asked.

I squinted back at her like the room was smoky.



"I'm worried because of how Thursday and Friday went. What if the school *still* has my classes all mixed up? I hate having to constantly switch classes and teachers!" I said, hoping she'd feel sorry for me and let me stay home for the rest of my life.

"Everything about your classes will be worked out. You'll see. It'll be fine." She hugged me. "Now, go get ready."

She was speaking to me in Ibo, which totally calms me down—normally. But nothing seemed to be breaking through the fuzz around my brain this morning.

As I was brushing my teeth, the knot in my stomach tightened. I tried to ignore it, but my thoughts were in a knot, too.

My mom wasn't right about me liking this town. What if she's not right about making friends? What if I don't ever make any friends?

What if they think I dress funny? Of course, according to the corncob costume I wore on Friday, I *do* dress funny.

I spit into the sink.

Maybe I don't feel well, I thought, staring into the mirror. In old cartoons, people always check their tongues for spots when they're sick. I stuck my tongue out really far. No spots. Not a one.

As I stepped into the shower, my six-year-old sister, Peace, opened the bathroom door and came in. She's Ike's twin, older by ninety seconds. And she doesn't let him forget it.

"Peace! I've told you like a zillion times . . . you need to knock!" I said, really annoyed.

"Sorry," she chirped.

Peace looked like a blurry blob through the shower curtain, but I could totally tell *she* was excited about school. Oh, to be six again . . .

"Striped one or the purple one?" she asked.

"What?" I asked. I hadn't been listening. Besides, with the shower running and her mouth full of toothpaste foam, it was hard to understand what she was saying. Peace started to repeat herself.

"Spit out first. I can't understand you," I said.

She spit. "My skirt. Should I wear the striped one or the purple?"

"What top?" I asked.

"My orange shirt with the sparkly fish on the front," she said.

"Striped," I answered.

"What are *you* going to wear?" she asked.

"No idea," I muttered.

"That's okay," she said matter-of-factly. "You look



great in anything.” And she bounced out of the bathroom.

I really do have a sweet little sis. Too bad I can’t just hang out with her all day instead of going to school.



At school, the faded smell of textbooks and floor cleaner greeted me. I could hear my heartbeat louder than my footsteps as the shiny hallway floor stretched out in front of me. I was being led to my new class by Principal Butter. No joke. His name really is Principal *Butter*.

I followed him to Language Arts. Hopefully this was the last switch.



“So, how long did you live in Nigeria?” Principal Butter asked.



“Well, actually,” I explained, “I’ve never lived in Nigeria, but my parents are Nigerian. I was born in Texas, then we moved around a lot. But before we moved here, we lived in London, England.”



“Very interesting . . . well, I’m sure you’re going to really enjoy your new LA teacher. Her name’s Mrs. Chickory,” he said.

Mrs. Chickory is tall, but with really small feet. Her head is small, but she has the hugest black eyes with dark, bushy eyebrows and a super-weird, almost beaklike nose. She reminds me . . . of something . . .

Oh, yeah! The ostriches I was counting last night, I thought as she walked toward me. I could picture her strutting around in my ostrich-counting mind. She put one feathery wing, er, arm around my shoulders.

"Welcome to our class," Mrs. Chickory said loudly.

She smelled a little like cream of broccoli soup. I could imagine her bending down to slurp it, ignoring the spoon.

"Class, this is Yuzi," she said as if she had rescued me from some other LA class.

I heard the whole class repeat my name in giggly whispers. How embarrassing.

"She is new to our school and is all the way from Nigeria," she said. "Please make her feel welcome."

Great. Whenever I'm introduced that way, people think I flew in from Nigeria just this morning and can't speak a word of English.

Mrs. Chickory pointed the way to my desk. "Larissa, Yuzi is going to sit next to you so you can help her out. Okay?"

Larissa smiled at me, and I was relieved to finally sit down. I was pulling a notebook out of my bag when Larissa leaned over to me. She has big brown eyes and she opened them even wider as she said, "Will you be my African friend? I've never had an African friend before."





What am I? Some sort of a collectible doll? I pictured myself packaged in a box for sale in the Barbie aisle.



Before I had a chance to respond, Mrs. Chickory's sharp voice said, "Yuzi, although you're new here, I want you to know that the one thing I do not tolerate in class is talking without permission."

"I wasn't," I said in a totally defensive voice. I felt hot all over.



"I also expect my students to apologize when they've made a mistake, not deny it," Mrs. Chickory continued.

"But I wasn't talking!" It came out louder than I meant it to, but I couldn't help it. I was being accused of something I didn't do! "All I did was sit down and start getting my stuff out. Larissa asked me a quick question and I hadn't even answered her yet."



"Young lady," Mrs. Chickory interrupted me. She pressed her lips into a straight line, which made her look like an *angry* ostrich.



"I don't know what they do in Nigeria, but here in America we respect our authorities! I'm going to ask you to step out into the hall for a few minutes and calm yourself. Wait out there until I say you can join the class again," she said, obviously really mad.

I stood up slowly. My heart was pounding and my throat

was tight. All the students were looking at me as I made my way to the door.

I was only in the class for like five minutes. I didn't do anything wrong! If all these terrible things keep happening to me, no one's *ever* going to know the real me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, holding back tears. With my back against a locker in the empty hall, I slowly slid to the floor, pulled my knees up to my chest, and wrapped my arms around them. As I dropped my head down, the shrill, brain-jangling sound of the fire alarm ripped through the silence. I jumped up, eyes wide, and slammed my hands over my ears. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone round the corner out of the hallway.

The horrible alarm continued as Mrs. Chickory dashed into the hall. She looked at me, then at the pulled fire alarm on the wall only a few lockers away. Her eyes returned to me and narrowed into slits. Then it hit me. She thought I pulled the alarm!

Students were flooding into the halls on their way to the exits. As Mrs. Chickory's class passed by, she frowned hard at me and said tightly, "You're coming with me."

She started to strut down the hall, assuming I would follow her.

I'm gonna hate this school.



Yuzi's Fake Alarm





Chickory, Buttery, Flip

"You *need* to understand me. Please! I didn't pull that alarm!" I said for the hundredth time. I was flipping out.

"We understand what you're saying, Yuzi, but you were the only one in the hallway," Principal Butter said.

I was sitting on the edge of a chair across from his desk. It felt really hot in there, but I was shivering. My mouth was so dry that I could hardly swallow. Mom was sitting next to me, hands together against her lips. Mrs. Chickory towered behind us, balanced on her tiny ostrich feet.

Principal Butter grabbed a bunch of tissues and wiped the sweat from his shiny head. Tiny shreds of tissue clung to his scalp. Through tear-blurred eyes, he looked like he had dots of toothpaste all over his head. For one weird moment, I felt a giggle coming up in my throat. If I weren't in the middle of the worst situation of



my life, I might have busted up laughing. But I was in the principal's office. And this was no laughing matter.



"I wasn't the only one in the hallway!" I said. "There was someone else."

"Who? Would you be able to identify them?" Principal Butter asked.

"I didn't get a good look," I said.

"Boy or girl?" he asked.



"I'm not sure. I saw they were wearing jeans, and I think it looked like a boy's shoe," I said, knowing it sounded dumb because it seems like practically the entire school is in jeans. "And there was a whitish mark on the bottom of one shoe," I added.



Mrs. Chickory made a funny snorting sound behind me. I looked back. Her chin was tipped up a little, and one raised eyebrow seemed to say, "I told you so" to the principal.



"When I stepped out into the hallway, Principal Butter, there was no one there except Yuzi," said Mrs. Chickory impatiently. "And as I've already told you, she was sporting quite an attitude when she left the classroom."

"But you didn't actually *see* her pull the alarm," said Principal Butter.

"Well, no. But she was standing right there!" Mrs. Chickory kind of sounded like Ike when he's whining for more dessert.

"Thank you, Mrs. Chickory. I apologize for keeping you so long. You can return to your class," Principal Butter said.

I could feel Mrs. Chickory staring at the back of my head, like sunlight through a magnifying glass. I could almost hear the sizzling sound. Then she left the office.

Principal Butter breathed in deeply. "This is most unfortunate, Mrs. Ukachi," he said to my mom. "Pulling a fire alarm is an extremely disruptive and expensive prank."

"I don't believe that my daughter would do such a thing. It's just not like her," Mom said. "She's also not prone to lying. If she says there was someone else in that hallway, I believe there was."

"I understand, Mrs. Ukachi, but no one else saw this supposed 'other person.'" Principal Butter made quote signs in the air with his fingers, then took another deep breath. "This is what I'll do. I'm sure this move has been difficult enough as it is, so, because Yuzi is so new here, I won't suspend her." He laced his fingers together and looked at me. "But it *does* look as if she pulled that alarm. And unless this other person confesses, or Yuzi can



identify him or her, I'm afraid I have no choice but to put her in after-school detention for three days beginning this Wednesday."

The office was completely silent, except for the scratch of a pen scribbling and then a little sliding sound as Principal Butter pushed the pink slip across his desk toward me.



I picked it up by the tippiest tip of a corner, like someone had used it to blow their nose.

Once I was in the hall alone with Mom, I let out all the things that were yelling inside my head.

"Detention for three days?" I said. "I'm getting detention for something I didn't do! This is **SO** unfair! Mom, I hate this town. I hate this school. I hate my life! I can never forgive you for moving me here!"

Mom just listened and rubbed my back.



"This is not going to help my 'new girl' problem one tiny bit. I had no friends to begin with, and now my reputation is crumbling like a sad sandcastle!" I paused. "Oh, that's right!" I said. "I don't even *have* a reputation yet. Unless you can count 'spandex-corncob-wearing-fire-alarm-psycho-freak!'"



My mom looked at me softly. "I know it's not right, but sometimes we have to endure things that aren't fair. And even though it hurts, it can make us stronger."

So I'll be lonely, but at least I'll be *strong*?

Oh, yay.

After dinner, Dad said he and Mom wanted to talk to me.

"So," Dad began. He and Mom and I were in their room with the door closed. In my house a closed door equals serious conversation.

Dad was sitting on the edge of the bed, resting against the headboard. He looked at me and continued, "So, I hear you're spending some time in detention for something you didn't do and it's your mom's and my fault for moving you to this horrible place."

When he put it that way, I sounded pretty terrible. He took the wind right out of my angry sails.

I shrugged. "It's so unfair," I mumbled softly. Then louder, "I can't believe I'm going to be punished for something I didn't do! Can't you think of some brilliant plan to get me out of this, Dad? You're a super-brainy geophysicist!"



Dad just smiled and shook his head.



I continued, "Ever since we moved to Marion, my life's been like some kind of whirling merry-go-round of craziness! Somebody needs to stop the ride or I'm gonna puke!"



"Uzoma, *wodata obi u ala*," Mom said gently. She says that whenever I start freaking out over something. It means "settle your heart down," which really means that I need to get a grip. She'd been pretty patient with my angry accusations. Now, I could feel her reeling me in.



"Seriously, Mom! Things just keep getting worse and worse! Some psycho kid at that crazy school pulled that fire alarm and knows that I got in trouble for it and doesn't even care! Grrrrr!" I crossed my arms across my chest. "I have *got* to find that kid and when I do . . .!"



"I'm sure whoever did it knows they did the wrong thing," Mom said. "It's quite possible that they feel bad, but are too frightened to confess."



"Mom! I can't believe you're defending someone who did this to me," I said. "You should be helping me blow their cover and send their sorry popcorn-popping self to the Butter Principal!"

"Okay," Dad said, getting up from the bed. "We'll just take everything one day at a time." He hugged me. "Go take care of your homework."

Mom came over and gave me a hug, too. I knew I didn't deserve it.

"And don't worry," Mom said. "These awful events won't last forever. You'll make friends, and have fun. Who knows? You might even start to like it here." She winked and smiled.

"U-girl, you might stop looking at what everyone else is doing wrong and start trying to see what lesson you're supposed to learn in all of this," my dad challenged tenderly.

I got off the bed and left their bedroom.

They just don't understand, I thought.

What *I* didn't understand is that I actually did have a reputation already. I just didn't know it.