

Double Dutch and Other Stories
Tag Cavello
Copyright 2013-2014 by Tag Cavello

Double Dutch and Other Stories
By
Tag Cavello

Contents

1. Double Dutch
2. Konky
3. Hurricane Angel
4. Aftermathers

Double Dutch

for Stacy Ross

1

In late May of 1984, the Strawberry Festival came to Norwalk, Ohio, as it did every year at that time.

Aaron walked down West Main Street with his head in the trees. The sun shined in the boughs like a promise told through a smile; it dried their leaves of the previous night's rain, and brought the window-sill flowers they courted to full bloom. A smell of cut grass loitered about the morning stillness. Birds twittered, squirrels scampered.

The boy, who was thirteen, noticed none of these things. He hardly even noticed the constant chattering of his friend Jill, who walked beside him with her hands moving, as if in effort to conjure the subjects she was going on about. And why was he so oblivious? The answer was twofold: He had money in his pocket, and the Strawberry Festival was in town.

They came to a small bridge spanning the Baltimore and Ohio railroad tracks.

"Let's cut across the street," Jill said.

Aaron heard enough of this at least to give her a nod, and as they crossed, they saw that West Main Street, from Church Street all the way down to Milan Avenue, had been closed off. People walked everywhere beyond wooden horses set up to block traffic.

Jill broke into a run. "Yay!"

"What, did you think it wasn't going to be there?" Aaron called, grinning.

They ran the rest of the way. Cut grass smells quickly gave way to more aggressive odors like bratwurst and caramel corn and cotton candy. With long black hair flying, Jill vaulted one of the horses. Her gracefulness came as no surprise to Aaron, who had seen her do things like skip rope and walk on her hands like it was second nature.

"The merry-go-round first!" she screeched.

"What? Why?"

She stopped in front of Bob's Bratwurst and flashed a dodgy smile. "I like horses. Now come *on!*"

And off she went, towards the intersection of Benedict Avenue.

It was a decent-sized merry-go-round for such a small town festival. Aaron watched it spin while they stood in line. Two or three younger kids looked scared, but the rest seemed to be enjoying the ride.

"More wooden horses," he said to Jill.

"More wooden horses," she agreed, a little breathily. "These look just a tiny bit more like the real thing though, right?"

"Well...yeah."

"Hey, wanna see my ring?" She raised her hand without waiting for a reply. On the third finger, a tiny stone gleamed.

"Where did you get that?"

The face peering up at him turned red. "I bought it. It isn't real of course."

"It looks real."

"Yeah?" she asked hopefully, splaying her fingers open.

Aaron smiled. "Yeah. It does."

"Two tickets for two horses!" the ticket-man bellowed. "That'll be one good American dollar!"

"Two tickets for *one* horse," Jill corrected him. "We're riding together today."

The tattered greenback Aaron had been pulling from his pocket froze. "We are?" he asked. His heart jumped like a man on a pogo stick.

"So you're a couple," the ticket-man observed. "How nice. Let's have the gentleman up first."

Aaron climbed onto one of the horses. Jill then stepped forward, her hand outstretched. Seconds later she was sitting behind him with her arms wrapped around his waist. Her head rested on his shoulder—all pink bubblegum and soft locks of strawberry shampoo.

"Um," Aaron stammered.

It made her laugh. "Somebody's blushing."

"Now hold it right there!" a voice cried from the street.

Aaron looked to see a man in glasses with a neatly trimmed mustache. His hands clutched a large, awkward-looking camera, and from the way he approached the merry-go-round he intended to use it.

"My name's Jim," he said. "I'm with the Norwalk Reflector. How about a picture for the front page?"

Horrified, Aaron shook his head. "Oh no no," he gibbered.

"Sure!" Jill sang.

"Jill!"

"Please? Come on, it'll be cool!"

Jim raised the camera without waiting for further debate. "Look natural, guys! Show me how you're feeling at this exact second!"

"Wait!" Aaron said.

And Jim did wait, but only for a moment.

"Ooh let's go to the magic show!"

It was late afternoon. Lights everywhere were starting to come on amidst the festival's constant, happy chatter. Aaron could hear bumper cars croaking near Seminary Street. Screams peeled from larger rides like the Trabant and the Scrambler. On a stage closer by, a group of girls were putting on a dance recital. Next to that were the tents. Some sold beer, where long lines of men stood checking their watches. Others sold t-shirts and cheap toys. Jill led Aaron past all of them. They read a sandwich board at the entrance of a larger, violet-colored tent. Inside, a crowd could be seen waiting before a rickety-looking stage.

"The Great Bloomcraft," Jill read off the board, "Thrills, Amazement, and Wonder!"

A picture accompanied this rather outlandish promise. It showed a man, dressed in black, coaxing a rabbit out of a hat. Aaron went to the ticket booth and paid another dollar. Five minutes later he and Jill had joined the crowd.

"This guy must be good," he remarked.

Indeed, the tent seemed packed to capacity, which obliged Jill to snuggle close. Aaron could not stop marveling at how comfortable she looked with her arms around him, as if she'd possessed knowledge about the destination of their friendship—which had begun three years ago—from the very start.

“With a name like Bloomcraft it's a sure bet,” she agreed.

The lights dropped. Everybody stopped talking. After a moment of silence, footsteps echoed from the stage. A tall, slender man appeared. He looked like any other magician Aaron had seen a hundred times before: long-legged, long-fingered, eyes set deep, a black top-hat perched on his head. He stopped center-stage. His face regarded the crowd without expression. Someone in the back coughed. Someone else let off a heavy sneeze.

“Welcome to the show,” the magician announced. “My name is Bloomcraft.” Then, after a moment's hesitation: “You will all be witnesses.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Oh please.”

But it seemed to be a day for mocking the impossible. Over the next forty minutes, Aaron saw things he never would have guessed were real. And most came from the hat: butterflies big as jungle parrots that burst into a rainy dazzle of glitter; a dancing mannequin; a barking cat; a meowing dog.

Just one hiccup occurred. At the end of the show, Bloomcraft announced that a rabbit who lived inside the hat would be closing the proceedings with a juggling act. After a wave from his hands, the rabbit jumped out. It was huge—Aaron guessed it would have come up to his hips were it standing next to him. Its white fur cast a ghostly glow around two red eyes that regarded the crowd with what looked like a mixture of intelligence and contempt.

Bloomcraft approached it holding three glass mugs. “Here you are, my furry little fellow!”

The rabbit turned its head. It then rose to its full height and, amidst a gasping of *oohs* and *ahhs*, swiped the mugs from Bloomcraft's hand. The gasps turned into cries of shock. One of the mugs spun at Jill's face. Without thinking, Aaron snatched it. A hot, stinging sensation burst through his hand...

And the entire tent went dead silent.

The mug, which seconds ago had been clutched in the magician's fist, was now clutched in Aaron's. Through an act of defiance, it had travelled from performer to observer.

The silence drew on. Slowly, someone began to clap. Another someone soon joined in, and then another, and another. Before long the entire tent, including Bloomcraft, was applauding Aaron's heroics.

Cheeks flaming, he stepped forward, proffering the mug. But the rabbit was still in a rebellious mood. It swiped again just as Bloomcraft bent to reclaim his prop. Everyone went *OH!* at the same time as Aaron jerked the mug backward. A white blur swished in front of his face. The rabbit had missed! Now it teetered for balance on the edge of the stage as more cheering erupted from everywhere.

Aaron felt a kiss on his cheek. He turned to see Jill smiling at him. In that same instant the cheering turned into hard, heavy laughter. Oh no! They were laughing at him for being kissed by a girl!

No, no. That wasn't it. No one was even looking at him. They were looking at the rabbit, which had fallen from the stage and into a box of confetti. Its head poked from a pile of rainbow colors, red eyes angrier than ever. Its ears, bent in two different directions, were a mess of bright sprinkles.

"Worth every penny!" one man who had laughed himself into tears gasped. "Every penny!"

"A show we will not soon forget," came Bloomcraft's voice from the stage. He bent forward again, and this time Aaron was able to give him the prop with no trouble at all. "Thank you, my good boy. You have very fine reflexes."

"I play baseball in the summer," Aaron, sheepish, explained.

"No doubt a contributing factor. Enjoy the rest of your evening at the festival."

Aaron thanked him and turned to go, but not before casting one last look at the rabbit. It was still in the box, still being laughed at. And its eyes, still furious, were fixed on him.

"Wow," Jill said once they were outside the tent. "I can't wait for the second date, Aaron."

He laughed as she put her head on his shoulder. "I don't think they're all gonna have quite that much...novelty."

They returned to the midway. It was after dark. Lights flashed, music played. As a last hurrah for the day, Aaron bought two tickets for the Ferris wheel. At the top, he leaned forward and kissed Jill on the mouth--his first real kiss. At that moment, all thoughts of the magician and his silly rabbit were gone.

At least for that one night. But by next morning, the rabbit was back. And it stayed with him, in one form or another, for the rest of his life.

2

"Two little dickie birds sittin' on the wall!

"One named Peter, one named Paul!

"Fly away Peter, fly away Paul!

"Don't you come back 'til your birthday's called!

"January, February, March, April, May!

"Now fly away, fly away, fly away all!"

Aaron awoke from a bad dream two weeks after the festival had ended. He got out of bed (sleep had not been coming well of late) and went to the sash. On the sidewalk below, three girls in T-shirts and shorts--one of them Jill--were skipping rope.

He could also smell bacon and eggs. Would breakfast be possible this morning? For once the idea did not seem so outlandish; no instant rebuke came from his belly. Feeling a little buoyed, Aaron began to get dressed.

Twenty minutes later the girls were giggling at him on the front walk. They blushed. They whispered to each other. They nudged Jill on the shoulder. This went on until finally Jill rolled her eyes and told her friends to shut up.

"Don't pay attention to them," she implored. "They're uptight. We're practicing for a tournament in July."

"Jump rope?" Aaron asked.

She nodded. Out of breath from her exertions, her eyes seemed even more blue than usual. "Double Dutch junior division. First prize is five hundred dollars."

"Wow that's quite a haul."

"Did you eat?"

He was silent. Jill had always been a girl who liked to change subjects on the fly. Keeping up with her during a conversation could sometimes be a challenge—a fun challenge, but a challenge all the same. On one breath she could go from stories about school to complaining about her parents to decorating the house for Christmas. Now, effortlessly, she had used that aptitude to train the spotlight on Aaron. He found it jarring, not because of the light itself, but because Jill's question—did you eat?—was also a confession. She knew something was wrong.

But where to begin? Not a single word had come out of his mouth and he already felt ridiculous. Rabbits were supposed to be cute, cuddly little things, after all. You didn't stand in the bright sunshine and talk about them as the subject of your nightmares. That kind of stuff was for crazy people.

"I ate," he managed.

"Your eyes are red."

"Can we take a walk?"

"Sure."

Her friends giggled some more as they left, but Aaron didn't mind. At least he had question number one answered: They were beginning by taking a walk. They went up Valley Park Drive, with its one-level houses painted in pastel shades of yellow and green, to West Main Street, where the older houses were. Summer had arrived early; the morning was hot, the air still. Old men drank lemonade on porch swings. Motorcycles (Aaron's dad affectionately called them "hogs") shined from open garage doors, ready for the road.

Jill talked more about the jump rope tournament. Her team had been practicing hard and the results were at last beginning to show. She told him they were jumping like competitors now. Aaron nodded in all the right places, asking questions from time to time. Where was the competition to be held? How would it play out? And on what, pray tell, did she plan to spend the prize money?

Then the topic of discussion swung back to Aaron. Baseball would be starting again soon, which was good. The books he'd been told by his teacher to read over the summer sounded boring, which was bad.

"Huckleberry Finn is not boring," Jill objected.

It made Aaron shake his head. "Man I can't tell you how little I'm interested in reading about two kids with bare feet paddling up and down a river."

"You'll like it."

"Maybe. I'll try, I guess."

She put an arm around him. "You didn't ask me on a walk to discuss books and baseball though."

"I didn't," he admitted.

Her eyebrow went up. "So?"

"Do you remember the rabbit we saw a couple weeks ago?"

"The one at the festival? Sure."

"I've been dreaming about it. Almost every night."

They came to a small, ancient church, where broken headstones idled beneath a number of whispering willows. Perhaps it would do for the story he had to tell.

It didn't take long. But Jill, as Aaron had feared from the start, found it difficult to digest. The expression in her eyes—a mixture of shock, amusement, and gentle concern—gave the game away. He finished by describing what he'd dreamed in his bedroom an hour ago, and waited to hear the girl's thoughts.

Her compliance was by no means immediate. Instead, she struck off towards the town's ice cream parlor. All he could do was follow. Soon they were eating crunch cones at the pick-up window. Here, at last, was where the verbal feedback commenced.

"So you've been seeing this rabbit in your dreams," Jill said in a tone level and cautious.

"Yes. For the past two weeks."

"Has it shown up anywhere else?"

"No," Aaron replied, flashing her an odd look.

"Okay." She licked the side of her cone to catch a drip. "And every time you see it, it's angry."

"Very, *very* angry. I think it wants to rip my throat out."

"Because you embarrassed it at the show?"

"That's the only reason I can think of. I'm being haunted by my own guilt."

"But it wasn't your fault."

"*MOMEEE!*" A little girl had appeared beside them; she was pointing at a poster that depicted Frankenstein's monster holding a milkshake. "*That one, Mommy! That one!*"

The mother in question stood gawping at the poster. "A Monster Shake? Oh come on, honey, that's too big."

"Please?"

"No."

"*Pleasssssse?*"

"You could share that thing with your entire family tree and still have some left over for the dog. Get something else."

"*WAHHHHHH!*"

"Knock it off, Sheila, I mean it."

Aaron felt something wet running down his hand. He looked--and his eyes all but broke from his head. The bawling girl had distracted him for too long! His crunch cone was turning into a mess! Panicking, Aaron began to lick like crazy at the sides. But the cone would have none of it. Everything, in fact, had tipped to the edge of total collapse.

"Help me!" he yelled around a mouthful of crunchies.

Jill couldn't help—she was doubled over with laughter. "Help me!" she yelled back, gripping the counter for support. "No more, please! It's too much!"

FLOP!

The remains of Aaron's cone hit the concrete. Aaron looked at it, then at Jill. He could feel ice cream dripping down his chin.

"Look, Mommy," the little girl said, "what a *mess!*"

It got Jill laughing even harder. Aaron told her in a dry voice to find a stool before she fell down. This advice was taken, but the laughter went on. Aaron sat down beside her. Why weren't there any napkins at the counter? he wondered. Didn't things like this happen all the time?

"Anyway," he brought out, trying to move past the moment.

Jill slowly and by degrees got herself under control. "It's okay," she said, patting him on the back. "I'm not laughing at *you*, I'm laughing at...at..." She began to choke as another jag threatened to burst forth.

Through it all, Aaron could only shake his head and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. "Baby," he grinned at her. "Darling, sweetheart, gorgeous. If this is all it takes to show you a good time then I'm going to bring you back to this place on our prom night."

"Not on your life."

She finished her own cone without too much trouble. Meanwhile the little girl had settled on two scoops of Dutch chocolate, which Aaron did not see as being very far down the ladder from the Monster Shake.

"Idea time," Jill said.

He blinked. "What?"

"I have an idea. About your rabbit."

"Fire away."

"Well, seeing that juggling number at the magic show may have triggered some phobia that you have about rabbits. And now your mind is going silly over the whole thing."

"So?"

"So," she went on, "we go and see the show again. Together. Find out how seeing the actual rabbit back on stage affects you."

Aaron thought about it. Perhaps Jill was on to something. Seeing the rabbit again, in a tent full of people rather than all by himself in a nightmare, could present an opportunity to make peace with the creature. At the very least, he and Jill would be getting a repeat performance of a magnificent show.

"Do you know where Bloomcraft might be these days?" Aaron asked.

"As a matter of fact I do," the girl replied.

The Milan Melon Festival was taking place that week six miles outside of Norwalk, which meant getting there required them to craft a few tricks of their own. This was doubly true on Jill's part, but she was able to convince her parents to drive her under the ruse of gathering information for a summer book report. The parents agreed to let Aaron ride along after a short talk over the phone with his mother.

And that was how he found himself standing once more inside the violet tent, with Jill at his side, to see Bloomcraft's show for the second time. Everything looked as it had before: the crowd was large, with the sandwich board out front promising Thrills! Amazement! and Wonder! Then Bloomcraft appeared, wearing the same top hat he'd had on in Norwalk. He told them they would all be witnesses. The performance commenced...

And laid a smelly, rotten egg.

Thirty minutes of uncoordinated blunders. None of the things Bloomcraft had given them at the Strawberry Festival—butterflies, mannequins, cats, dogs—were offered up today. Instead the audience was served a patently fake, borderline ridiculous buffet of card tricks, mirror games, and optical illusions.

Once, while Bloomcraft was attempting to shuffle the cards, he slipped and fumbled the entire deck all over the stage; as he bent to retrieve his mistake, a loud fart-*-thhhhppt!*--burst from his pants, invoking laughter three rows deep.

Another stunt, called The Disappearing Dessert, produced similarly disastrous results. "Watch this, everyone!" Bloomcraft commanded, holding a large apple pie in one hand. He tossed the pie into the air, waved a cheap plastic wand—and the entire tent erupted into wild guffaws as the pie landed on his face, splatting fruit and crust everywhere.

The entire tent, except for Aaron.

His bewilderment had exceeded his sense of humor. What was going on? Was Bloomcraft trying his hand at slapstick comedy out of boredom for his previous routine? If so, he did not appear comfortable with the effects. His hands shook, his eyes blinked. Sweat poured from beneath his ears. He asked for a club soda from the audience and got no takers. In short, he looked a mess.

"I don't get it," Aaron told Jill, after Bloomcraft backed his butt into a sword during a blade box trick.

"I don't either," she giggled, "but it's funny, Aaron. *Really* funny. I'm glad we came."

"He's not doing it on purpose."

"No, it doesn't look that way."

At the end of the show, Bloomcraft didn't pull anything out of his hat. He didn't even take it off. He merely gave a trembling, ungracious bow to the audience, thanked it for its time, and exited the stage.

It wasn't enough for Aaron. He asked Jill to wait with him inside the tent until everyone had gone, then pulled her by the hand to the back of the stage, where the smell of dry wood (clippings scattered the ground like petals from a terra-cotta garden) wafted about a ragged flap. Behind this flap was a patch of asphalt. There was also a

small, wooden cart where—with a tired expression on his face—stood Bloomcraft. He took no notice of Aaron and Jill as they approached, still holding hands.

"Hello," Aaron said.

Bloomcraft jumped, banging his head on the rail of the cart. His eyes widened.

"Can I help you?" he snapped.

He looked older up close. There were pockmarks on his face, as if it had been pelted with dozens of tiny asteroids. His eyes were sunken and dark. His black hair was shot with gray.

"Where's your hat?" Aaron asked with genuine curiosity.

"Never mind my hat," the magician snapped some more. His voice, dry and barbed, sounded like a bundle of sticks being put through a chipper-shredder. "You kids shouldn't be back here."

"We liked your show," Jill told him.

"Fine. Come back tomorrow and you can see it again."

"Not this show. The one you did at the Strawberry Festival."

Bloomcraft eyed her for a moment. Then he looked at Aaron—and something must have clicked, for the expression on his face changed, as if a release valve had been turned to the left. All the tension relaxed.

"I remember you," he said, a trifle reluctantly. "In Norwalk, right? You were the one who caught the mug."

"That's right," Aaron confessed. "Your rabbit got a little upset."

"Salto was sick that night. He shouldn't have gone on."

"Is that his name?" Jill asked.

"Yes." The magician knelt and picked up a box of pyrotechnics. "He's my good luck charm. Makes every show a breeze." The box went into the cart. "I really missed him tonight."

"Where is he?" Aaron chanced.

The other looked at him without so much as a twitch. "Still sick. Poor thing."

"What's wrong with him?" Jill wanted to know.

Without replying, Bloomcraft threw a strap over top of the cart and clipped it on the other side.

"Mr. Bloomcraft?"

"The veterinarian hasn't called," he said finally, "so I can't know for certain." Another strap went over the cart. "I'm sorry if I failed to please you tonight. I'd offer you a refund, but then everyone would ask for one, wouldn't they?"

"Everyone isn't here," Aaron pointed out. "Like your rabbit."

The strap clipped down hard. "As I've told you," the magician said from the other side of his cart, "he's sick."

Aaron didn't know what to do now. Bloomcraft was in no mood for conversation—that much could be ascertained from the short, terse answers he gave, and from the way he shuffled about his cart like a puppy looking for a place to pee. Jill seemed to realize this as well. Her face showed a mixture of thoughtfulness and frustration that in its own way summed up their entire meeting.

"If we're finished here," Bloomcraft said, "you can get back to the street through the tent. Only please give the stage a wide berth. It isn't very safe for children."
And with that, their encounter with the magician came to an end.

"Rats," Aaron said, holding the flap for Jill.

She ducked under, hair trailing a scent of strawberry shampoo. "Did you see his eyes? I thought he was about to cry. He must miss that rabbit all right."

"Yeah. He looked...broken somehow. Used up."

They walked around the stage. Empty and silent now, the tent felt nowhere near as blithesome as before. Shadows hovered in deep, undulating recesses. Thick and heavy support beams seemed to tilt at strange angles, like the mighty masts of a sunken pirate ship.

Jill touched Aaron's shoulder. "Feel free to walk me through this place quickly and with as much chivalry as you can muster."

"Do you mean that?" he smiled.

"Yes, please."

He bent and scooped her off the ground. It was a risky undertaking, but the dividends turned out to be perfect. In one instant Jill's face went from grim uneasiness to pure delight. Squealing like a cheerleader, she clutched an arm about his shoulders and kicked her legs into the air.

"Aaron what are you doing? You're *crazy!*"

"Well, Bloomcraft was a bit too uptight this afternoon to teach me levitation. So I'm taking a more pedestrian approach to the act."

"Are you going to carry me all the way back to the square?"

"Yep!"

He meant it, but the ticket master caught them at the exit flap. An old, bald man with enormous glasses and blubbery lips, he began scolding them straight away for trespassing and loitering.

"Do the police know you're here?" he snarled, pointing a stubby finger. "Eh? *Do they?* These tents ain't no place for kids to be foolin' around!"

Aaron had already put Jill down. The idea now was to keep from laughing and bursting into flames from embarrassment at the same time. Not an easy trick—he needed more input from Bloomcraft.

"Yes sir," he answered as best he could.

"'Yes sir' my hairy, wrinkled butt! Get outta here, both of you!"

"Yes sir."

And they both ran down the street, hand in hand, past little boys carrying plastic airplanes and little girls carrying dollies; past fat men with hot dogs and fatter women with soda cans; past criers shouting *break the balloons!* and *put a ring on the bottle!*; past candy wrappers tumbling in the breeze and Japanese lanterns swaying in the trees. They ran hand in hand, laughing like loons.

"I want you to have something," Jill said.

Two hours later. Twilight. Valley Park drive had turned orange. Fireflies flared over the grass. Wind-chimes jingled.

"What is it?" Aaron asked.

She reached into the pocket of her shorts brought out a white rabbit's foot. "Something physical," she said, proffering the foot, "to dispel the bad dreams, which are not in any way real and never will be."

His hand reached forth tentatively. "I don't know, Jill. This might make it worse."

"Nonsense." The foot dropped into his palm. Then she took his hand in both of hers and curled the fingers closed. "Remember always," her voice spoke softly, "where the dreaming ends and the being begins. Draw a line for every thing you care about and step over it."

"Does the foot really bring good luck?"

"It has for me," she whispered.

And then she kissed him. Her lips were soft as flower petals, her breath a sigh of summer in a midnight meadow. When it was over, Aaron watched her run to her porch, arms waving, ponytail bobbing. The screen door banged open, banged closed. She was gone.

"Aaron?" His mother's face had appeared in the window next door. "Come inside, honey, it's almost dark."

"Okay, Mom."

Sliding the rabbit's foot into the pocket of his jeans, Aaron went inside.

3

There were things to do over the next month. Summer things, like watching television in the morning, listening to the radio at night. Racing bicycles up and down the street with friends, catching fireflies, eating ice cream. Hanging out at the video arcade and the skating rink. These last two activities were mainly spectatorial in nature for Aaron, while Jill had become a master at games like Ms. Pac-Man and Tempest. He could scarcely stand on roller skates; she glided the rink with her eyes closed, fearful of nothing. Aaron liked the baseball diamond much better. His little league team went undefeated that year. In July came talk of a championship. Aaron, who played shortstop, was batting .310. Some of his teammates were doing even better. On Saturday, July the fourteenth, they were 8-0, with two games left to play.

Also on that day was Jill's jump rope tournament. It took place at Norwalk Middle School, home of the largest, most modern gymnasium in town. Aaron already knew it well; his fourth period gym class used it every day during the previous school year.

He parked his bicycle and walked to the vestibule where a number of girls and their parents had already gathered. The morning was hot. Sunlight gleamed off brightly colored T-shirts. High-pitched, musical chatter filled the air. Everyone, to Aaron at least, looked wired to the point of near detonation.

He found Jill's team by the cafeteria entrance. They wore red shirts with yellow shorts. On the back of each shirt was the word WILDFLOWERS. Aaron did not interrupt

them while their coach—a tall, slender woman whom Aaron recognized as the school's sixth-grade social studies teacher—issued last minute instructions and advice. Aaron hung back, pretending to be distracted. Chatter from other teams floated by—things like *I'm so nervous!* and *Keep your heels off the floor!* The WILDFLOWERS stood with their hands on their hips, nodding at their coach.

"All three of you girls are going to cruise right through the compulsory and freestyle sections," the social studies teacher pledged. "But Jill, you may find yourself running out of breath during the speed run. *If*, that is, you forget my advice. Which is what?"

"Breathe with the rhythm of our rhyme, with my mouth in the shape of an *O*," Jill incanted.

"Beautiful. How do the lungs feel now?"

"They feel great!"

"And the legs?"

"Ha! Even better!"

"So we're going to win?"

"We're going to win!"

The social studies teacher blinked at the other two girls, who had not answered this last question with Jill. "Gee, I'm sorry, ladies," she pouted, "you must not be interested in the five-hundred dollar purse some *other* team is going to take home."

"We're going to win!" the girls shouted in unison.

"What?"

"WE'RE GOING TO WIN!"

"What?"

"WE'RE GOING TO WIN!"

"Wildflowers rule!"

The entire vestibule went silent. All four Wildflowers, plus every girl from every other team, plus their parents, stared at Aaron. Blushing, he stared back, waiting for it to end.

"What?" he told them at last. "Y'all got somethin' against a guy rootin' for his team?"

"Y'all got somethin'?" Jill said to him, after his fifteen minutes of fame wore off. "Did you start Huck Finn?"

"Oh be quiet." He hooked an arm around her waist. "Are you ready for this?"

"Five minutes, Jill!" the coach called.

The chatter began to get even more boisterous. Showtime was fast approaching.

"I'm ready," she told him, "but I could use some tips on how to relax."

"Think about what relaxes you. Your very favorite thing. Then think about doing it once the tournament is over. What's compulsory, by the way?"

She blinked. "Compulsory? Oh!" Understanding flooded her face. "That comes first. It's a series of specific maneuvers given to each team by the judges. Then comes speed, where they time how fast you can jump for how long. Then freestyle. That one's my favorite. You get to perform pretty much any trick you want."

"Okay. So--"

"Jill!" It was her mom. She waved to Aaron and he gave a shy nod.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

