

Nobody Laughed

by Bernard Beckett



Aiden walked to school with a spring in his step and a bright green bag on his back. It was the first day back after the summer holiday. The sun shone brightly. Aiden kicked at stones and whistled to himself. He loved his school, and he loved his new bag. It was big but not too big – the perfect size for books, his lunch, and his secret favourite thing.

Aiden's friend Kane was waiting at the school gate. At first, they were so busy telling each other their holiday stories (new house, new hill, new bike, missing tooth) that they didn't even notice they had the same bag.

"That's the thing about shopping at the Bigbarn store," Kane shrugged.

But then they saw that Lauryn had the same bag, too, and Jessie and William and Toeiva and Charlotte and ... in fact, their entire class. The day was getting weird.

"Just a coincidence," Mr Chalmers said brightly. (His bag was black and battered, with a tarnished buckle that had once been gold.) "We'll need to be very careful to hang each bag on its own hook so there are no mix-ups."



Of course, there was a mix-up. It happened while the class was out running laps of the field. (Mr Chalmers called it PE.) The school caretaker decided that it would be a good day to finally replace some broken hooks, and to do that, he had to take down all the bags and put them in a pile – a great big, fluorescent green, Bigbarn-store special pile.



There was a lot of shouting when the class got back from their run.

“Put that down. It’s mine!”

“No, this one is yours. Mine wasn’t that heavy!”

“Give it here!”

“Let it go!”

“This one’s mine!”

“Not even!”

“What are we going to do?”

Aiden said nothing. He’d already guessed what would happen next, and *that* had him worried. Sure enough, Mr Chalmers suggested the only possible solution.

“We’re just going to have to open up the bags, one by one, and look inside.”

Aiden had picked a very bad day to carry his secret favourite thing to school. When the others saw it, he would surely die of embarrassment. He put his head down and waited for the shameful moment to arrive.

Mr Chalmers opened the first bag. He pulled out a long, white bone. Aiden thought it probably came from a cow – it was that big.

“That’s my moa bone,” said Helen. “Sefton Johnson sold it to me for five dollars.”

Aiden waited for people to start laughing, but nobody did. Not even Sefton. It was turning out to be one of those upside-down, impossible-to-predict days.

“How about this?” Mr Chalmers held up a plastic bag containing an egg beater, a ball of string, a rubber band, and a calculator.

“I’m making a rocket,” said Nathan. “When I find the right fuel, it will travel to the moon.” Nathan was full of big notions that never worked out. Mostly, people laughed at his ideas, but not today.



Tamsin had a dead frog, a sprig of parsley, and an egg that she claimed was a thousand years old. She said that she was learning to become a witch. Nobody laughed.



Toeiva had a tea bag inside a small picture frame. It had once been inside Ma'a Nonu's tea cup when he had visited Asafo's auntie. Nobody laughed.

Charlotte had a magnifying glass. She explained how she used it to check the small print on labels. She had made a hobby of collecting long words that she didn't understand ("amaryllifolius" was her favourite). It was certainly a strange hobby, but nobody laughed.



One by one, the bags were opened, and each revealed its own secret favourite thing. There was a satin cape, a lock of hair, a lump of coal, a list of songs beginning with the letter A, and a superhero action figure. And not once did anybody laugh. Perhaps, Aiden worried, the class were saving up all their laughter for him.

Finally, there were only two bags left. Aiden crossed his fingers and hoped his would be last. That way Mr Chalmers wouldn't even have to open it. They'd know it was his already. He closed his eyes and crossed his fingers. A drop of sweat ran down his neck. His left knee began to shake. Mr Chalmers opened the second-to-last bag and pulled out a small, orange tutu.



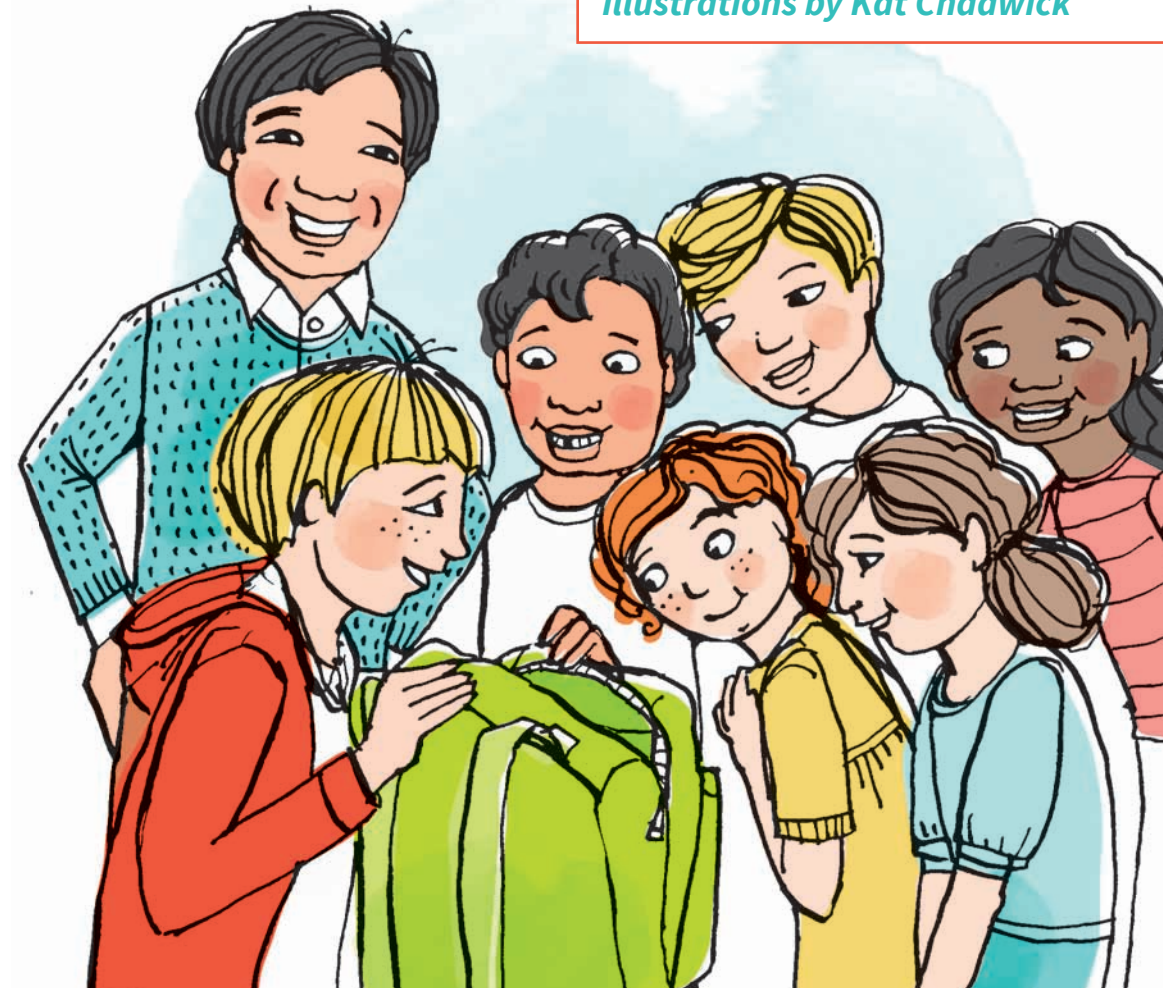
"Um, that's mine," said Kane. He walked forward and claimed his bag. Nobody laughed.

"Well then, this one's yours," said Mr Chalmers, throwing Aiden the last, unopened bag.

"Hey, that's not fair," called out Sefton. "We want to see what's in his bag too."

Aiden smiled. He opened his bag and showed the class his own, secret favourite thing. And nobody laughed.

illustrations by Kat Chadwick



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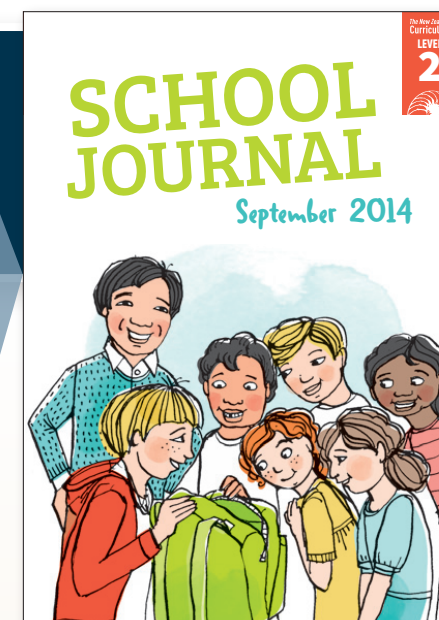
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