

**Excerpt: Sometimes the sky is blue**

by **Latoyah Innerarity**

shortlisted for the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize

I'm not sure why I like Jemma, it's not as though she's nice to me. Maybe it's because she's beautiful. Like I wish I could be. She has mint green eyes and thick, curly hair, dyed blonde at the tips that she poofs with a red afro-pick. Her face is so round it could have been drawn with a compass, and so smooth and brown it looks like a beautiful circle of wood a carpenter has varnished lovingly and now left in the sun to dry. I imagine her face is a table crafted by the carpenter just for his family. It will take centre place in his home, dusted daily by his wife and where his children sit to colour. Her nose is small and turned upwards. It's invisible almost, like two small holes drilled into the centre of the carpenter's table.

Jemma says I’m ugly and look like a witch. It hurts that she's right. My nose is long and my jawline chunky, like a scrap of jagged wood, discarded by the carpenter.

I'm in English, waiting for Mr. Hicks, who is late as usual. I’m sat in the middle of a long table I’m (annoyingly) sharing with Hannah and David who are at the end and flirting, (“come on! my boobs aren’t that big are they? They can’t be the biggest you’ve ever seen?! That’s just silly. No, I will not tell you my bra size!” In amongst lots of silly giggling, hair tossing and boobs squeezed together). I hate that giddy, ‘trying hard to be sexy’ thing. It’s so not sexy, and nothing at all like Jemma, whose sexiness is cool and effortless like the Ray Bans she wears before and after school and sometimes at break, if the teachers aren’t looking.

It’s before lunch though some time after breakfast (which I didn’t have) and from outside the smell of canteen lunches swallows everything in here so my jumper, book and the perfume Hannah sprays in her hair smells of soggy fries and sweet barbecue chicken. Jemma, (Ray Bans in her breast pocket), is sat a couple of meters away, on a desk in the corner, beneath a poster of Shakespeare, who looks at her with soft admiring eyes. Her boyfriend Vincent stands between her legs. He twirls her hair around his fingers as they chat, stopping where the blonde hair meets black. Their conversation is audible in parts. Odd words and snippets of laughter drift on the air like autumnal leaves the wind occasionally brings to me. But it’s not enough. I want to hear the kind of information she shares with someone she loves. And in her words, I’ll be immersed and happy, like a child in a pile of tanned raked leaves. I slide closer to hear her better, jogging the table.

“Hey, watch it,” Hannah says, thumping the table in my direction.

I pretend I’m reading (The Kite Runner) but really, I’m listening to Jemma.