

Before You Read

Becky and the Wheels-and-Brake Boys

MEET JAMES BERRY



James Berry grew up in Jamaica, and he writes about life there and elsewhere in the Caribbean region. “In the Caribbean, we were the last outpost of the [British] Empire,” he says. “No one has reported our stories, or the way we saw things. It’s the function of writers and poets to bring in the left-out side of the human family.” Berry, who now lives in England, is a well-known poet and literary critic. His books for young people include *Ajeemah and His Son* and *The Future-Telling Lady*.

James Berry was born in 1925. This story was first published in 1987.

READING FOCUS

Have you ever wanted something you were told you couldn’t have? What did you want? Why did you want it? Why couldn’t you have it?

Think/Pair/Share

Tell a partner about an experience in which you really wanted something. Then share your experience with the class.

Setting a Purpose

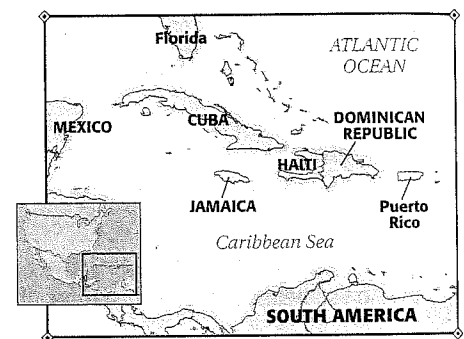
Read “Becky and the Wheels-and-Brake Boys” to see how the narrator tries to get something she wants.

BUILDING BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In 1494 Spanish explorers led by Columbus landed on an island in the Caribbean Sea called Xaymaca by the people who lived there, the Arawak Indians.

In 1655 England captured Jamaica from Spain. Enslaved Africans were brought in to work on Jamaican sugar plantations. In 1962 the island won independence. Jamaica’s official language is English, but most people speak a mixture of English and languages originating in Africa.



VOCABULARY PREVIEW

veranda (və ran’ də) *n.* a long porch, usually with a roof, along one or more sides of a house; p. 372

overseer (ō’ vər sē’ ər) *n.* one who watches over and directs the work of laborers; p. 373

scruffy (skruf’ ē) *adj.* worn or dirty; shabby; p. 374

straightaway (strāt’ ə wā’) *adv.* at once; immediately; p. 375

Becky

and

the



Wheels - and - Brake

Boys

James Berry ~

Even my own cousin Ben was there—riding away, in the ringing of bicycle bells down the road. Every time I came to watch them—see them riding round and round enjoying themselves—they scooted off like crazy on their bikes.

They can't keep doing that. They'll see!

I only want to be with Nat, Aldo, Jimmy, and Ben. It's no fair reason they don't want to be with me. Anybody could go off their head¹ for that. Anybody! A girl can not, not, let boys get away with it all the time.

1. Here, *go off their head* means "go crazy."

Bother! I have to walk back home, alone.

I know total-total that if I had my own bike, the Wheels-and-Brake Boys wouldn't treat me like that. I'd just ride away with them, wouldn't I?

Over and over I told my mum I wanted a bike. Over and over she looked at me as if I was crazy. "Becky, d'you think you're a boy? Eh? D'you think you're a boy? In any case, where's the money to come from? Eh?"

Of course I know I'm not a boy. Of course I know I'm not crazy. Of course I know all that's no reason why I can't have a bike. No reason! As soon as I get indoors I'll just have to ask again—ask Mum once more.

At home, indoors, I didn't ask my mum.

It was evening time, but sunshine was still big patches in yards and on housetops. My two younger brothers, Lenny and Vin, played marbles in the road. Mum was taking measurements of a boy I knew, for his new trousers and shirt. Mum made clothes for people. Meggie, my sister two years younger than me, was helping Mum on the veranda. Nobody would be pleased with me not helping. I began to help.

Granny-Liz would always stop fanning herself to drink up a glass of ice water. I gave my granny a glass of ice water, there in her rocking chair. I looked in the kitchen to find shelled coconut pieces to cut into small cubes for the fowls' morning feed. But Granny-Liz had done it. I came

and started tidying up bits and pieces of cut-off material around my mum on the floor. My sister got nasty, saying she was already helping Mum. Not a single good thing was happening for me.

With me even being all so thoughtful of Granny's need of a cool drink, she started up some botheration² against me.

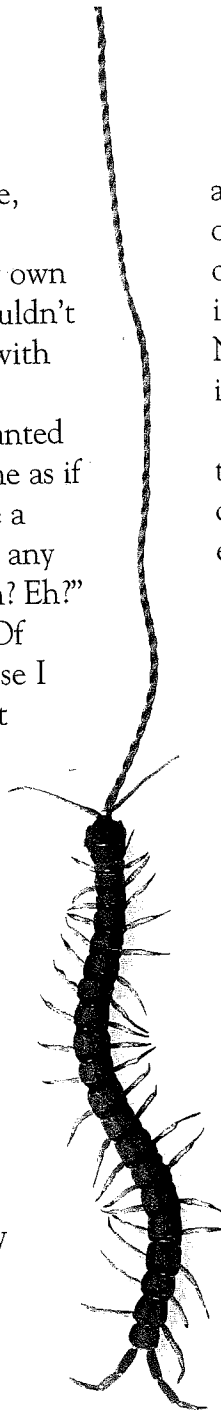
Listen to Granny-Liz: "Becky, with you moving about me here on the veranda, I hope you dohn³ have any centipedes or scorpions⁴ in a jam jar in your pocket."

"No, mam," I said sighing, trying to be calm. "Granny-Liz," I went on, "you forgot. My centipede and scorpion died." All the same, storm broke against me.

"Becky," my mum said. "You know I don't like you wandering off after dinner. Haven't I told you I don't want you keeping company with those awful riding-about bicycle boys? Eh?"

"Yes, mam."

"Those boys are a menace. Riding bicycles on sidewalks and narrow paths together, ringing bicycle bells and braking at people's feet like wild bulls charging anybody, they're heading for trouble."



2. *Botheration* means "trouble, worry, or complaint."

3. This is Granny-Liz's way of saying *don't*.

4. A *centipede* is a long, flat insect with many sets of legs, and a *scorpion* is related to the spider but has a stinger at the end of a long tail.

Vocabulary

veranda (və ran' də) *n.* a long porch, usually with a roof, along one or more sides of a house

"They're the Wheels-and-Brake Boys, mam."

"The what?"

"The Wheels-and-Brake Boys."

"Oh! Given themselves a name as well, have they? Well, Becky, answer this. How d'you always manage to look like you just escaped from a hair-pulling battle? Eh? And don't I tell you not to break the backs down and wear your canvas shoes like slippers? Don't you ever hear what I say?"

"Yes, mam."

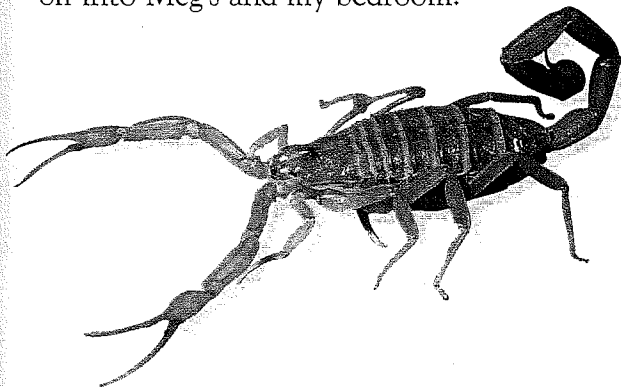
"D'you want to end up a field laborer? Like where your father used to be overseer?"

"No, mam."

"Well, Becky, will you please go off and do your homework?"

Everybody did everything to stop me. I was allowed no chance whatsoever. No chance to talk to Mum about the bike I dream of day and night. And I knew exactly the bike I wanted. I wanted a bike like Ben's bike. Oh, I wished I still had even my scorpion on a string to run up and down somebody's back!

I answered my mum. "Yes, mam." I went off into Meg's and my bedroom.



I sat down at the little table, as well as I might. Could homework stay in anybody's head in broad daylight outside? No. Could I keep a bike like Ben's out of my head? Not one bit. That bike took me all over the place. My beautiful bike jumped every log, every rock, every fence. My beautiful bike did everything cleverer than a clever cowboy's horse, with me in the saddle. And the bell, the bell was such a glorious gong of a ring!

If Dad was alive, I could talk to him. If Dad was alive, he'd give me money for the bike like a shot.

I sighed. It was amazing what a sigh could do. I sighed and tumbled on a great idea. Tomorrow evening I'd get Shirnette to come with me. Both of us together would be sure to get the boys interested to teach us to ride. Wow! With Shirnette they can't just ride away!

Next day at school, everything went sour. For the first time, Shirnette and me had a real fight, because of what I hated most.

Shirnette brought a cockroach to school in a shoe-polish tin. At playtime she opened the tin and let the cockroach fly into my blouse. Pure panic and disgust nearly killed me. I crushed up the cockroach in my clothes and practically ripped my blouse off, there in open sunlight. Oh, the smell of a cockroach is the nastiest ever to block your nose! I started running with my blouse to go and wash it. Twice I had to stop and be sick.

I washed away the crushed cockroach stain from my blouse. Then the stupid

Vocabulary

overseer (ō' var sē' ar) *n.* one who watches over and directs the work of laborers

Shirnette had to come into the toilet, falling about laughing. All right, I knew the cockroach treatment was for the time when I made my centipede on a string crawl up Shirnette's back. But you put fair-is-fair aside. I just barged into Shirnette.

When it was all over, I had on a wet blouse, but Shirnette had one on, too.

Then, going home with the noisy flock of children from school, I had such a new, new idea. If Mum thought I was scruffy, Nat, Aldo, Jimmy, and Ben might think so, too. I didn't like that.

After dinner I combed my hair in the bedroom. Mum did her machining on the veranda. Meggie helped Mum. Granny sat there, wishing she could take on any job, as usual.

I told Mum I was going to make up a quarrel with Shirnette. I went, but my friend wouldn't speak to me, let alone come out to keep my company. I stood alone and watched the Wheels-and-Brake Boys again.

This time the boys didn't race away past me. I stood leaning against the tall coconut palm tree. People passed up and down. The nearby main road was busy with traffic. But I didn't mind. I watched the boys. Riding round and round the big



Sisy. Diana Ong (b. 1940).

Viewing the painting: How might the friendship between these girls be like the one between Becky and Shirnette?

Vocabulary

scruffy (skruf' ē) *adj.* worn or dirty; shabby

**Did You Know?**

The bright, red-and-orange flowers of the *flame tree* give it this name.

flame tree, Nat, Aldo, Jimmy, and Ben looked marvelous.

At first each boy rode round the tree alone. Then each boy raced each other round the tree, going round three times.

As he won, the

winner rang his bell on and on, till he stopped panting and could laugh and talk properly. Next, most reckless and fierce, all the boys raced against each other. And, leaning against their bicycles, talking and joking, the boys popped soft drinks open, drank, and ate chipped bananas.

I walked up to Nat, Aldo, Jimmy, and Ben and said, "Can somebody teach me to ride?"

"Why don't you stay indoors and learn to cook and sew and wash clothes?" Jimmy said.

I grinned. "I know all that already," I said. "And one day perhaps I'll even be mum to a boy child, like all of you. Can you cook and sew and wash clothes, Jimmy? All I want is to learn to ride. I want you to teach me."

I didn't know why I said what I said. But everybody went silent and serious.

One after the other, Nat, Aldo, Jimmy, and Ben got on their bikes and rode off. I wasn't at all cross with them. I only wanted to be riding out of the playground with them. I knew they'd be heading into

the town to have ice cream and things and talk and laugh.

Mum was sitting alone on the veranda. She sewed buttons onto a white shirt she'd made. I sat down next to Mum. *Straightaway*, "Mum," I said, "I still want to have a bike badly."

"Oh, Becky, you still have that foolishness in your head? What am I going to do?"

Mum talked with some sympathy. Mum knew I was honest. "I can't get rid of it, mam," I said.

Mum stopped sewing. "Becky," she said, staring in my face, "how many girls around here do you see with bicycles?"

"Janice Gordon has a bike," I reminded her.

"Janice Gordon's dad has acres and acres of coconuts and bananas, with a business in the town as well."

I knew Mum was just about to give in. Then my granny had to come out onto the veranda and interfere. Listen to that Granny-Liz. "Becky, I heard you mother tell you over and over she *cahn*⁵ afford to buy you a bike. Yet you keep on and on. Child, you're a girl."

"But I don't want a bike because I'm a girl."

"D'you want it because you feel like a bwoy?" Granny said.

"No. I only want a bike because I want it and want it and want it."

Granny just carried on. "A tomboy's like a whistling woman and a crowing

5. When Granny-Liz says "*you mother*" and "*cahn* afford," she means *your* and *can't*.

Vocabulary

straightaway (strāt'ə wā') *adv.* at once; immediately

hen, who can only come to a bad end. D'you understand?"

I didn't want to understand. I knew Granny's speech was an awful speech. I went and sat down with Lenny and Vin, who were making a kite.

By Saturday morning I felt real sorry for Mum. I could see Mum really had it hard for money. I had to try and help. I knew anything of Dad's—anything—would be worth a great mighty hundred dollars.

I found myself in the center of town, going through the busy Saturday crowd. I hoped Mum wouldn't be too cross. I went into the fire station. With lots of luck I came face to face with a round-faced man in uniform. He talked to me. "Little miss, can I help you?"

I told him I'd like to talk to the head man. He took me into the office and gave me a chair. I sat down. I opened out my brown paper parcel. I showed him my dad's sun helmet. I told him I thought it would make a good fireman's hat. I wanted to sell the helmet for some money toward a bike, I told him.

The fireman laughed a lot. I

began to laugh, too. The fireman put me in a car and drove me back home.

Mum's eyes popped to see me bringing home the fireman. The round-faced

fireman laughed at my adventure. Mum laughed, too, which was really good. The fireman gave Mum my dad's hat back. Then—mystery, mystery—Mum sent me outside while they talked.

My mum was only a little cross with me. Then—mystery and more mystery—my mum took me with the fireman in his car to his house.

The fireman brought out what? A bicycle! A beautiful, shining bicycle! His nephew's bike. His nephew had been taken away, all the way to America. The bike had been left with the fireman-uncle for him to sell it. And the good, kind fireman-uncle decided we could have the bike—on small payments. My mum looked uncertain. But in a big, big way, the fireman knew it was all right. And Mum smiled a little. My mum had good sense to know it was all right. My mum took the bike from the fireman Mr. Dean.

And guess what? Seeing my bike much, much newer than his, my cousin Ben's eyes popped with envy. But he took on the big job. He taught me to ride. Then he taught Shirnette.

I ride into town with the Wheels-and-Brake Boys now. When she can borrow a bike, Shirnette comes too. We all sit together. We have patties and ice cream and drink drinks together. We talk and joke. We ride about, all over the place.

And, again, guess what? Fireman Mr. Dean became our best friend, and Mum's especially. He started coming around almost every day.



Did You Know?

A sun helmet is a sturdy hat with a wide brim all around. It is also called a pith helmet.



Responding to Literature

PERSONAL RESPONSE

- ◆ Are you surprised by the ending of the story? Why or why not?
- ◆ Think about the experience you shared in the **Reading Focus** on page 370. Were you satisfied with the outcome in your own situation? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

RECALL

1. What does Becky want? Why?
2. How do Becky's mother and grandmother react to her desire?
3. What happens when Becky tries to convince the boys to teach her to ride?
4. What does Becky finally do to get what she wants? What happens?

INTERPRET

5. **Theme Connection** In what ways does Becky think getting what she wants will change her life?
6. How do you know that Becky's family is struggling to make a living?
7. How are boys and girls supposed to act in Becky's culture? How do you know this?
8. How important is the memory of Becky's father in this story? Explain.

EVALUATE AND CONNECT

9. Do you recall when you learned to ride a bike? Did it change your life as much as it changed Becky's?
10. The **resolution** is the part of the plot that reveals the outcome or solves the problem in the story. What is this story's resolution? Is it satisfying? If so, in what ways?

LITERARY ELEMENTS

Narrator

"Even my own cousin Ben was there. . . ." When a story uses words like *I* and *my*, the story is told from the **first-person point of view**. Readers see and experience what happens in the story through a **narrator**. The narrator tells the story. The reader responds with the narrator to his or her hopes and disappointments. When using this point of view, the author cannot tell readers what other characters think and feel. Their thoughts and feelings are revealed through dialogue and through what the narrator notices and how he or she interprets it.

1. Who is the narrator of this story?
2. How does knowing the narrator's thoughts and feelings affect you as you read the story?

● See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R6.

