



The Toothpaste Millionaire

By Jean Merrill

author of *The Pushcart War*

My Friend Rufus

This is the story of my friend Rufus Mayflower and how he got to be a millionaire. With a little help from me. With a lot of help from me, as a matter of fact. But the idea was Rufus's.

Rufus's idea wasn't to become a millionaire. Just to make toothpaste. He was twelve and in the sixth grade at the time. By the time Rufus goes into the eighth grade this fall, he'll have over a million dollars in the bank.

I don't suppose you know too many eighth graders who are millionaires, and you wouldn't know Rufus was one to look at him. He still wears the same old blue sweater.

First, I'll tell you how Rufus and I got to be such good friends, since I'm white and he's black, and this seems to surprise some people.

Two years ago the company my father works for moved from Connecticut to Cleveland, Ohio. In Connecticut we lived in the suburbs.

You may not believe it, but up to the time we moved to Cleveland, I had never met a black person. There weren't any black families where we lived in Connecticut. But in East Cleveland, where we live now, there are quite a few. East Cleveland is an old neighborhood with big houses and lawns and trees that look a hundred years old. My father says you can't buy a new house built as well as these big old houses.

Our house in Cleveland has a lot more rooms than our house in Connecticut. There's a room called a conservatory, which is just for plants! And there's a huge laundry room and workshop, which came in handy when Rufus decided to make toothpaste.

I didn't meet Rufus until several weeks after school started. Sometimes it's hard making friends in a new neighborhood, and the kids on my block weren't too friendly at first. It was okay at school, but after school and on weekends, it was lonely.

There wasn't anybody to hang around with but my brother James, and he isn't interested in anything but model cars. If you've ever had a brother who's crazy about model cars, you know his conversation isn't very interesting. You can't even understand it. It's all about camshafts and gear ratios and rpm's.

I know that if you want to make friends, you have to be friendly. And I tried.

There were two girls about my age, Clem and Josie, who lived in the house next door, and I thought it would be easy to make friends with them. One afternoon I saw them watching me pick apples from this nice old apple tree we have in the backyard, and I invited them to come over and pick some apples if they wanted. But they said no.

Another time when Clem broke her badminton racket, I called over to ask if she wanted to borrow one of mine. But she didn't.

Maybe they didn't like apples or were tired of playing badminton. But I had the feeling it was that they didn't want to get involved with me. Maybe because I was white.

One of the nice things about Rufus is this. He doesn't seem to mind that I'm white and he's black. He doesn't even mind that I'm a girl. My brother James, though, can hardly stand it that I'm a girl. This can be pretty annoying in a nine-year-old boy.

With Rufus I didn't even have to try to make friends. It was as if we always had been, from the first day I met him. I was riding my bike to school, and the strap that I use to hold my books on the back of the bike broke. I heard my books go thunking all over the street.

Well, I pulled up to the curb and was trying to figure out how to rescue the books. Papers from my notebook were blowing all over the place.

Every time I ducked into the street to grab a paper, cars started honking their horns. It was the rush hour, and nobody wanted to stop.

Suddenly this kid on a bike pulls up behind me. He jumps off his bike and runs into the middle of the street and puts up his hands like a traffic cop.

"Take your time," he says to me. Then, when he gets the traffic under control, he helps me pick up all my stuff.

Some kids who lived on my street were standing on the sidewalk laughing at the two of us crawling under cars. One of them yelled, "Hey, Rufus, you'll be late for school."

Rufus didn't pay any attention, except to explain to me, "That's my name—Rufus."

Rufus tried to fix my broken book strap. But when he tied it together, it wasn't long enough to go around the books.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll put them in my saddlebags."

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Sixth-grader Rufus Mayflower doesn't set out to become a millionaire. He just wants to save on toothpaste. Betting he can make a gallon of his own for the same price as one tube from the store, Rufus develops a step-by-step plan with help from his friends, classmates, and math teacher. By the time he reaches the eighth grade, Rufus makes more than a gallon—he makes a million!

“Merrill's idealistic construct of how to succeed in business without really trying functions both as a light story and as an explication of free enterprise mechanics.” —*Booklist*

“Breezy and fast-moving.” —*Horn Book*

“The illustrations are engaging, the style is light, the project interesting—and Rufus a believable genius.”
—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

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