**About Russell**

*by Rita Williams-Garcia*

“Give me a number. Any positive number!” my brother Russell said, hot on the enthusiasm of his latest discovery. It had something to do with being able to calculate square roots in a way other than using the standard method.

My sister, brother, and I were all talented in some area. I read early and spontaneously, my sister Rosalind was a gifted artist, and my bother Russell loved science and math. Close in age, we were each other’s friends, audiences, and co-conspirators—although this did not stop us from occasionally ganging up, two against one. For the most part, we were each other’s allies and listened to each other’s ideas and dreams.

“MIT here I come,” Russell said.

Mommy, who was listening from the living room said, “That ain’t nothing.”

Rosalind and I translated Mommy’s remark in the three ways she meant it: (1) “Square roots won’t put beans on the table,” (2) “No one’s going to let black boys discover nothing else but basketball,” and (3) “If you’re so smart, why can’t you score over eighty in school?”

Russell gave a muffled but nervous laugh that went under his breath and out through his nose. Then Rosalind and I giggled too, mainly so he wouldn’t be laughing alone.

Russell still believed he had something. Anxious to prove Mommy wrong, he brought his discovery to Mr. Hershkowitz, his math teacher, who was both impressed and excited that one of his students thought about math beyond doing the homework. This was understandable. Russell and I attended Junior High School 192 in Hollis, New York, a school that in the early seventies was noted for drug trafficking, gang infestation, and a bloody playground murder.

Envisioning paths where Russell’s discovery could lead him, Rosalind and I began grooming him for interviews with the local news and math journals. In our minds, Russell’s future was bright and without limitation, starting with a full scholarship to MIT or Northwestern.

We waited to hear further developments. After weeks of researching Russell’s square root formula, Mr. Hershkowitz found that some graduate student had written a paper about it. Mr. Hershkowitz still offered encouragement to Russell and sent away for this paper so Russell could see how mathematicians present ideas. I remember him reading it, giving that low laugh of his in intervals as he read.

“Hey Russell, look at it this way,” Rosalind said. “It took a Ph.D. to discover what you found on your own in the eighth grade.”

Mommy said, “I ‘bout figured it was nothing.”

This didn’t stop Russell from making discoveries. I recall one night in July Rosalind and I couldn’t sleep in our room, which had neither a fan nor air conditioning. We were baking, so we opened our window for fresh air even though it meant being eaten by mosquitoes nesting in the sweet pine two feet from the window. The air cooled the room and we finally drifted off to sleep some time after one o’clock. It was a short sleep, for at two-thirty-seven a.m. the lights switched on, framing Russell’s lanky figure in the doorway.

“Guess what?” he exclaimed, waiting for our rejoinder.

We groaned.

“I can calculate the distance the earth will spin off its axis by the year 2000!”

Our pillows went flying in the doorway before he could give details.

By my freshman year in high school our parents had finally separated, much to our relief. They had been fighting nonstop during the three years that Daddy had been home from Vietnam. They argued day in and day out. Anything from Rosalind mentioning art school to Daddy wanting Russell to wash his car provoked an argument. The house was always in a state of war, and we heard every word.

Rosalind and I seemed to handle their fights as best we could, however, Russell was always affected. On one hand, he wanted to protect Mommy—although Mommy always got the best of Daddy. On the other hand, Russell was angry at her too.

Their separation was a blessing. Rosalind, Russell, and I hated going on welfare but we preferred the relative peace in our home to the battleground. Russell seemed to benefit the most of all, coming into his own in high school. For one thing, Mommy didn’t fuss too much when he got a part-time job through the Youth Corps, and her objections to his joining the track team at school were clearly ceremonial.

Before our eyes, Russell became a different person. His teammates nicknamed him Cobra because his head weaved from side to side as he climbed uphill in his cross-country runs. A nickname! Actual friends! Rosalind and I thought. We were thrilled that Russell had come out of his shell. Every night following practice, he’d entertain us with hilarious stories of Rico, Francois, E-Train, and Vernon, imitating their put-downs, gestures, and running styles. He had never been so animated. The following year he was made co-captain of the team and helped coach the girls’ track team.

Things were going well. One morning his senior year there was a knock at the door at about 6:45 a.m. From our bedroom, Rosalind and I glued our Afroed heads to the window to get a glimpse of the caller. I was sure the woman was a friend of Rosalind’s from college. Rosalind was sure the caller was a friend of Mommy’s because she was too “grown” to be one of her friends.

At closer look, we could see that the woman was a girl with school books, and that she had come asking for our brother Russell.

The two of us ran to the top of the stairs to peer down at the doorway where Mommy stood, then back to the window to see the girl. We slapped Russell on the back as he made it downstairs.

From the top of the stairs we saw our mother, speechless and powerless, as her son brushed past her to greet Sherri. It was a big event. A girl had come knocking on the door for our brother. She stood there, as bold as day, letting Mommy know she was there for her son. Russell came downstairs and the two walked off. He seemed to have an entire conversation for her and she was interested. Gasp! They were holding hands!

Rosalind and I were ecstatic. It was so important to us, this validation that our brother was normal. Russell had developed a stubbornness over the years, a wall between himself and other people. Even when we were much younger, living in California, he would go out of his way to alienate our friends for no particular reason. He knocked over board games or just plain old quit when things weren’t going his way.

I recall playing the greatest kickball game ever, back in Seaside, California, with five on each team, the score tied, and the right to shout, “We won!” at stake. The bases were loaded and Rosalind, the tiebreaker, stood at the plate, ready to kick one down Vallejo Street. Russell hurled the ball to the plate. Rosalind trotted to meet the pitch and then kicked it hard but low, straight into Russell’s hands. With the ball still in his hands, Russell calmly left the playing field, walked to our house, and went inside. No one could believe it. The greatest kickball game ever and Russell ended it without explanation.

He couldn’t be moved. Names, no matter how harshly thrown, rolled right off his back—or it seemed that way. Our pleas always went unanswered. Bribes were considered but were ultimately dismissed. Russell’s strongest weapon was his “NO” and he used it often. I think it came from his always being constantly pulled between Mommy, who wanted an obedient son, and Daddy, who wanted a platoon leader. In his way Russell held his ground, but from some angry, inarticulate place, deep within himself. Rosalind and I didn’t know that his self-erected wall was how he protected himself. We just thought he was being a pain in the butt.

When he wasn’t being obstinate, he was the opposite, sharing what he knew, especially with me, his little sister. In fact, he taught me to play chess, back when the Bobby Fischer–Boris Spassky matches were being televised. I’m sure he taught me to play only to have a target to punish. I was just so pleased my brother would give me the time of day. I’d make my sheepish moves, and he’d swoop down and take my pieces as quickly as my hand retracted from them. Sometimes he’d let me go along advancing my pieces down the board, only to find myself in an irrevocable predicament. These games were always humiliating for me, but Russell enjoyed them.

Eventually I had enough humiliation and began playing chess with the guys next door. They smoked a lot of reefer and were just learning the game, so I won most of the matches. As I played the guys next door, I developed a sense of rhythm and strategy for the game, and chess became fun.

One Saturday evening in August, just before I went away to college, my brother and I sat down to play a game of chess. I don’t remember any of the particulars, just that I said “checkmate” about twenty minutes after we began. He just grinned, looked down at the board, and said, “hmm,” the way he did when he found a flaw in one of his discoveries.

I was amazed. Not so much that I had won, but that he let my pieces stand in victory on the board. Although he had matured since his days of knocking the pieces off the board, I at least expected him to put the chess set away.

I was too proud of my victory to linger on my brother’s good sportsmanship. Instead I marveled at my black chessmen dominating white territory. I took inventory of his captured pieces, relishing the playback of each seizure. This was more than a game to me. It was a trophy, because I had beaten my brother.

The pieces stood on the table, even as I left home to go off to college. Strangely enough, the board remained intact when I came home that Thanksgiving, and for winter break as well. When I brought my things home the following summer, I looked at the table and saw that my queen, rook, and bishop still cornered his lone king. In my mind, I explained the chessboard as a shrine maintained by our mother. She needed to remember that she had children who once played games in her house.

We were all grown and out of the house, except for Russell. Rosalind had an apartment and went to LaGuardia Community College for accounting. (Mommy picked out her major.)

Russell didn’t get into MIT, but we’d figured he wouldn’t since his grades were average. He was, however, accepted into Penn State on a partial track scholarship, but the tuition and room and board were still too expensive. Besides, Mommy didn’t want him to attend college out of state. Instead Russell went to New York Technology at Old Westbury. This was perfect, because both our schools were on Long Island. Russell commuted back and forth and would visit me in my dorm at Hofstra.

All the while that we were growing up, he always called me Rita or Squirt or Sloppy Joe. Now that I was a woman, he called me “Little Sister.” Feeling somewhat lost in my new environment, I didn’t mind too much. Besides, my big brother helped me paint my dorm room, gave me twenty dollars, and brought me a television set from home.

Eager to impress him, I told him of chess exploits—how I joined the chess team and never went to the dining hall without my magnetic chess set. He seemed only mildly interested.

He then told me about New York Tech and his course load. College math and science were different from everything he had ever read—and he had read many books. “I like physics,” he said optimistically. He laughed nervously and added, “Now if I could only pass those exams.”

At the end of his sophomore year, Russell dropped out of New York Tech. We never really talked about it.

After New York Tech, he found work as a groundsman at Rochdale Village, a large co-op not far from our house. He’d run five miles in the morning, then read in the evenings when he came home from work.

Again, my brother was changing, but I couldn’t really see it. I was thirty miles away, wrapped up in school. Rosalind, who wasn’t too far from home, noticed changes in Russell’s behavior. Things like his “yes” “no” answers. That he ate mostly peanut-butter cookies and Argo starch—which is what Black people used to eat to lighten their skin. Mommy used to give us starch to eat as children, but we had outgrown the taste for it. For whatever reason, Russell was eating starch again. His mouth was always white.

After a year, Russell was laid off from Rochdale. He found work as a security guard, but these jobs never lasted.

By my junior year I lived on campus all year round. Between sorority life, political activism, boyfriends, and modern dance I couldn’t stop moving. I came home for brief visits, but these visits were too awkward without Rosalind. The house was profoundly still. Mommy stayed in her room. Russell didn’t talk, let alone look at me. The chess set was still standing there, pieces and all!

Rico, one of his track buddies from high school, told me he used to see Russell walking out toward the airport every morning. He’d call and call after him, “Cobra! Hey, Cobra-man!” but Russell didn’t recognize Rico and would keep on walking.

Mommy wasn’t even approachable on the subject of her son and Daddy would say, “What that boy needs is a woman.” I once made the suggestion that Russell be diagnosed for mental illness and got what I expected: “Take one psychology class and you know everything. You need to go on back to college….”

Russell’s problems were hard to ignore. He now had medical concerns, which were hard to ascertain, since he wouldn’t talk. Huge boils covered his skin and he was always in pain.

Rosalind and I finally ganged up on Mommy to get her to take him to a doctor. She finally relented some of her control and took Russell to the clinic to get his boils lanced. The lancing was all that was done, and no other areas of Russell’s condition were looked into.

Russell took the sanitation test several times and scored well, but they never called him for training or work. Daddy, who worked in real estate, got Russell odd jobs cleaning houses newly listed on the market, but the work wasn’t steady. Always broke and without a routine, Russell became depressed.

All of Russell’s prospects were far from his grasp, physically and mentally. He stopped running. Ideas did not occur to him as far as we knew. Reading was replaced by watching sci-fi TV shows. Further and further Russell slipped away, unable to make eye contact or hold a conversation. When he did speak, it was in a monotone, his eyes fixed elsewhere. Some ten years later when he came to my home for a visit, I realized he was talking to himself.

Unemployable by most standards, he took to collecting soda bottles and redeeming them for a nickel a piece. At first Rosalind and I were embarrassed. Our brother was going through peoples’ garbage cans! But Rosalind put things in perspective. He never asked us for anything, nor did he go about begging other people for money. He just did whatever he could, quietly, on his own.

When I see others making strides in science and technology I tell myself, “Russell could have thought of that.” I have a hard time accepting that that was Russell a long time ago.

When I talk about my brother, my well-meaning friends say, “You have to do something. Get him a job. Get him some psychiatric help.” They don’t understand. In spite of his illness, he has always maintained his “NO.” A grown man, Russell simply will not do what he doesn’t want to.

Looking back I wish I could say there were telltale signs that Russell would suffer from mental illness, but there were no incidents or episodes to point to throughout our childhood. Symptoms of his illness, his social withdrawal and talking to himself, came on gradually in his adulthood and were difficult for us to identify.

Openly discussing Russell’s illness and seeking help and information would be ideal, but it is not likely to happen within my family. Perhaps it is a function of our African-American working poor background, but we’re simply not talkers. My sister and I talk more about Russell’s poor diet and taking steps to encourage him to eat better than about his mental health. I’m the only family member who uses the term “mental illness” regarding Russell.

Through all of my struggling to come to terms with my brother’s condition, my family simply accepts him as is. Part of this is woven into our background. If we complained about indiscernible ailments as children, Mommy would say, “Don’t go looking for trouble, because it will find you.”

I still miss my brother.

I was out one day with my daughters shopping for groceries. It wasn’t any day. It was my fortieth birthday. We turned the corner to walk down our block when Stephanie, my youngest daughter, said, “There’s Uncle Russell!” He was at the garbage dump of a nearby apartment building rummaging for bottles. He looked up in time as we crossed toward him and said, “Happy birthday little sister.”

I smiled and said, “Hey Russell.”