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The Scratchboard Project

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The Scratchboard Project

“Draw Shanice?” Mrs. Sharpe said through the screen door, wiping her hands on a towel. She glanced down at the sketchpad under my arm. Behind her, shirtless little black kids were hopping around. They opened the screen door themselves and flooded around me on the porch.

“Everyone, this is Josh.”

They looked up, and in that instant, as I looked down at all of them, I saw for the first time the world in X-ray—black and white shapes floating before my eyes like objects tied to a mobile, just as my art teacher Mr. Thompson wanted us to see for the scratchboard project.

The scratchboard project. An exercise in negative and positive relationships. You started with a piece of board with black coating on it, and you had to take your etcher and etch out a drawing, make a white image out of solid blackness. Essentially, you had to draw in reverse. You left what you ordinarily drew in and took away what you ordinarily left white.

The rules for the project were simple:

- 1) pick someone in school you don't know
- 2) go to their house and study them “gesturally”
- 3) then turn them inside out, through sketches, later to be used as templates for transfers to the scratchboard.

Naturally I had procrastinated, and now everybody I halfway knew from every decent house in town had been taken. I ended up here, in the next town, Bolivar, on this god-forsaken porch. Shanice Sharpe was the meanest black militant bitch in school. Her little brothers stood gazing up at me with placid faces that I was sure would turn inside out and hiss like demons.

Mrs. Sharpe shooed them away from my legs.

“Josh is in Shani's grade in school,” she said. “He lives over in *Happers Ferry*.”

“Alabama?” said the littlest one.

She led me inside to a small, dark room crowded with junk I couldn't see well. Chairs, boxes, and bags of aluminum cans—all

were in our way, along with stacks of *Washington Post* TV guides. There were Sony TV boxes used as furniture, holding up gigantic boxes of Cheerios and Pampers. On the walls were so many pictures of black children with shining white teeth that I couldn't see what was underneath—wood, mud, straw, or aluminum siding with bullet holes. There were crucifixes, too, not the good Irish Catholic kind, but cheap-looking white plastic ones, from a five-and-ten somewhere.

All the kids were yapping at once. Shanice's brother Tyrone came out of nowhere. He was so enormous he had to lower his head under the doorway. He had on sneakers that were as big as snowshoes, an orange tank top that came down to his knees like a dress, and cap turned backward. The sight of me standing in his house took him by surprise, and he stood there shyly.

"Tyrone, you wanna show Josh your trophy?" she said, speaking to us like a kindergarten teacher. "Go on now."

I followed him into an even smaller room. Nintendo games on the floor, posters of Shaq and black girls in bikinis all over the place.

"Here," he said, his big arm swinging around.

All I saw were greasy black fingers around a shiny silver trophy that looked stolen. I had to say something.

"You won that?"

He turned around and stood up against me. I barely came up to the zero on his jersey.

"Yeah, I won that. What'd you think? Came in a box of Cheerios?"

Truthfully, yeah. He might have had me alone, but I wasn't as scared of him as he thought, even if he was three times bigger.

"Where you live in *Happers* Ferry, little man? Ridge Street?"

"Polk Street," I said.

"Pork who?" He broke into a stupid snicker, his shiny black face all scrunched up. "Shit, Jed Clampett Jr."

Then he asked me something in black gibberish, but I didn't understand and stood staring back at him.

"Damn, dude," he said, coming in clear now and flipping his big hands around like a L.L. Cool J or something, "you want a Coke or not?"

Mrs. Sharpe, appearing at the door, looked concerned for the situation.

“Tyrone,” she said, “remember what we talked about?”

He went into his big shy kid routine, plopping his huge body down on a spring bed, squeaking it to death.

“Yes, ma’am, my manners.”

He was so shame-faced and meek, beaten down by his mother, that I didn’t know who was worse off—him or me?

“Josh is just shy,” Mrs. Sharpe said.

No, I wasn’t. I had just trapped myself in this filthy Bolivar house, with all these black kids staring at me and God only knows what heaped around me—guns, drugs. All for the stupid scratchboard project, the biggest damn worry in my life.

Mr. Thompson was making it a whopping 50 percent of our grade, and if I failed art—and I was already failing French—then I’d fail two classes, and maybe the whole year as a result. How could I even be in this situation? No one in my family had ever been held back a year.

“Think in terms of negative and positive space,” Mr. Thompson said.

“Take things apart. See your environment differently.”

“Learn to observe, rather than working from memory.”

Pure torture. Nobody did scratchboard today. It went out with cave painting. If not then, with sixteenth century printmaking. It was impossible to think in reverse for very long. Sooner or later you etched away too much black coating, and you were sunk. But there was no adding back, not like drawing with a pencil, when all you did was add.

But here I was in the worst house in Bolivar, with a tribe of blacks gawking and laughing at me, armed with only a sketchpad. It all seemed a weird dream, like Josh in Africa or something.

To find a place to put my eyes, I looked around at the walls. I saw the negative and positive shapes reversing—the dark bookshelf becoming light, the light wall becoming dark, the whole X-ray effect again. Suddenly, out of a cubbyhole in this house appeared a girl who looked like a black Barbie doll. Makeup, earrings, Whitney Houston hairdo. She was so pretty she looked stolen, like the TV set and Tyrone’s silver trophy. Shanice! She looked so different I didn’t recognize her. In school, she always wore a scarf or handkerchief over her head. She saw me and went into nasty mode.

“What’s he doing here?”

Her thin eyebrows were raised up like daggers.

"To see you," said her brother, rolling on the springy bed, enjoying every bit of his little joke. He was just like my brother Jerry—a menace.

Then, all eyes fell on me again and my sketchpad.

"Josh is an artist," Mrs. Sharpe told the little ones, trying to keep the situation under control.

"I know," said Shanice. "He a show-off, too."

"I'm an artist," Tyrone said, sitting up.

He took off his cap to show me letters shaved into his afro in back, but I couldn't make out what they spelled.

"Damn, he dumb," said Shanice.

I gave her a look. She might have made herself as pretty as a model, but she was still trash on the inside.

"Josh, does your mother know you're here?" Mrs. Sharpe asked me.

I nodded, and she smiled.

"She works for the town, doesn't she?"

Technically, it was for the mayor.

"They live in that big rich place with all them limos around it," said Tyrone, daring me to deny it.

He was referring to Robert Byrd's house on Ridge Street. All the little kids' eyes went wide.

"You rich?" said one of them, pulling on my finger.

Shanice was in no mood for all this chummy talk. She crossed her arms and nodded at me. "Why you here?"

"He wants to draw you," said her mother. "For a school project."

I couldn't understand Mrs. Sharpe's kindness. Her face had all the torture of slaves in paintings down in the Harpers Ferry Visitor's Center, but she went on being kind like my mother, who looked like Sandy Duncan.

"Draw me?" said Shanice.

"I know what he want," said Tyrone, snickering.

"He rich," said the same little boy.

"You here to fix our step?" said another.

I kept my eyes on Mrs. Sharpe. She was my only hope.

Just then, a little fat-faced girl pushed her way in close. "Shanice think you cute," she said.

Tyrone kicked his big foot at her, then tossed his yellow Shaq notebook at me.

“Don’t *look* at me, Jed,” he said, with another rapper’s wiggle of his hands. “*Draw* me, brother.”

He earned a few laughs for his antic.

But when I slid the chair around to see him straight on, everyone knew I meant business. Maybe I couldn’t draw in reverse, but drawing regular—now that was something I could do. I opened my sketchpad, but Tyrone said he wanted the drawing in his notebook. That way he could keep it to show everyone. Mrs. Sharpe was looking on intently. Suddenly the kids were gathered around, clinging to my shoulders and legs and breathing in my ear. One of the little ones was actually lying across my knee. It was the strangest feeling. In seconds, I had gone from a white boy to hate to someone with magic in his fingers.

I had never drawn a black face before, except from a painting of John Henry. Not that it mattered. In portraits, every face was different. As Mr. Thompson put it, each feature was a certain distance away from the other, an exact position and relation. There were basic guideposts to follow: Between the eyes, leave space for a third eye. For the nose, start with the crescents of the nostrils. Also, remember to line the center of the mouth up with the bottom of the ears. I liked to think of it as plotting stars. Everyone’s eyes, nose, and lips were like stars making up a constellation: Big Dipper, Southern Cross, Canis Minor. The kind of paper didn’t matter, and a pencil was a pencil, as long as it could be made either dark or light.

Tyrone’s notebook was how I imagined his locker—full of doodles and stupid words like “bitch rammer” and “funk train”—the work of a seven-foot third-grader gone delinquent. I unjammed his chewed-up pencil from the spiral binding and put the notebook square on my lap. Tyrone, arms folded and big legs coming off the bed like toppled telephone poles, sat giving me a smug, sweaty stare. I went into my drawing mode, gazing at him for a long moment, seeing him only as the subject, not worrying about him as the big bully he was.

“You know John Denver?” said one of the little girls, leaning on me.

“He look like John Denver,” said another.

To start, I needed only to get the nose right. It was slow going, drawing what amounted to BBs on the whole white page. There

were no beautiful sweeping strokes, no scratchy sounds of charcoal on rag paper. My audience grew impatient.

“That don’t look like him,” said one of the little kids.

“I don’t see nothin,” said the fat-faced girl.

“Hush up!” said Shanice.

The little girl, leaning against my shoulder, started teasing, “She like you, Jed.”

When Shanice slapped her a little too hard on the shoulder, Mrs. Sharpe called her down, and that set in motion so much commotion that everyone except Tyrone, Shanice, and me was sucked out of the room. One by one, the little kids trickled back in and took up a position around me.

“Make me look like Shaq,” Tyrone said, leaning forward, trying to see.

With his nose finally drawn, I could give them something to look at. In dramatic sweeps, I sketched in the cheeks and chin, to their oohs and aahs. To hell with the scratchboard project. This was what art was all about!

Shanice stood closer to me. Her little sister, with big, rolling eyes, noticed.

“She wants you to draw her next, Jed,” she said.

“Hey,” said Tyrone, with his mother gone, “wanna see my bullet holes?”

Shanice made a groan, and Tyrone lifted up his tank top, showing small circular scars on his fat stomach and ribs. I leaned forward. They looked like burn marks from Granddad’s King Edward cigar.

“You got shot?”

“Hell, yeah. Four times.”

Four times? How could he not be dead? He could see I was amazed, so he held the shirt up longer for me to see.

Shanice laughed. “You sheltered, boy.”

I sat looking at her. So? Maybe I was.

“You don’t live in that big fancy house,” she said.

“Did it hurt?” I asked Tyrone.

“Duh,” Shanice said, hitting me on the shoulder.

“He passed out,” laughed one of his little sisters.

Tyrone leaned across the creaky bed, picked up a sneaker, and threw it at her.

“Get, Precious!” he said.

Out of the room, like a flutter of birds, half of them flew, yapping and carrying on. That left the three of us.

“So you came all the way to Bolivar for a ‘school project,’ huh?”

I knew what she was saying—that Bolivar was second rate to historic Harpers Ferry, where I lived. The only reason anyone ever drove through it was to take a shortcut to the new highway. There were no impressive restored park buildings up there, no tourists, no park rangers, just black families and little streets filled with shotgun houses along busted up sidewalks. Nothing historic or great ever happened there.

“He like you, stupid,” said her brother.

I liked how she looked, yes. This was the first time I had seen her without her stupid handkerchief.

“Did you go to Vanessa’s?” I said, nodding at her hair.

Vanessa’s Hair Salon was the only black hair salon in town.

“Oh, look,” she said to her brother, “now the boy know Bolivar.”

Tyrone, rolling out of the bed, crouched over my shoulder like the shadow of a mountain. “You finished, Jed?” When he saw his portrait, it was as if I had given him the world. He grabbed the notebook and ran out of the room, all his little brothers and sisters following.

“I’m gonna sell it,” he was saying.

“No, you’re not,” said Mrs. Sharpe. “You’re gonna hang it up.”

I was alone in the small room for a moment. I saw a second bed in the corner, along with a sleeping bag along one wall, and another along the opposite wall. They all slept in here? In this tiny room?

Then Shanice came back in. She was strange and quiet and staring at me.

“You really wanna draw me?” she asked.

Her voice was different. All the nastiness was gone. She had the look of having worked up her courage to talk to someone who had just dropped out of outer space. What I would say next, I knew would make a fool of me. But I had always wanted to say it to a girl, and Shanice, suddenly, was the prettiest I had ever seen, even though she was black, and somehow *because* she was black.

“I know my own heart.”

I wasn’t sure where the saying had come from, maybe a song, but I always liked it. In this case, though, it didn’t even sound like my voice. She glanced off as if trying to find the ventriloquist or some-

thing. Then her eyebrows went up. “You mean that song? Shasta Q?” When I sat there looking confused, her almond-brown eyes narrowed, and her nasty voice came back. “What you talking about?”

Before I could answer, Tyrone charged back in, acting like an ape, playing an air guitar, twanging out the Beverly Hillbillies song.

“Hey, Jed, give me an earring like Barry Bonds,” he said, putting the notebook and pencil back in my hand.

“Don’t call him Jed,” his sister snapped.

He stopped, his expression froze up, and he started laughing so hard he fell back on his bed.

“Oh, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, you like him?” he said, rolling around like an idiot. “You like old Jed.”

“Shut up!”

“He gonna draw you? He make you white like Britney Spears.” He sat up. “Know why they expelled her last year, Jed?”

“Mama!”

“Doing Mr. Jenkins under his desk.”

He made a blowjob gesture with his mouth. She slapped at him, but he just covered up and laughed. As she ran out of the room, screaming to her mother, one of her little sisters came in.

“Jed, can I have a drawing, too?” she said, trying to act cute and pretty like Shanice.

A little boy came in behind her. “Can I have a car?”

Behind him was a littler boy with a big open schoolbook teetering in his hands. He dumped it in my lap, trying to hold his finger on a spot on the page.

“Get away, Reginald,” said his sister.

“Is this where you from?” he said in his little voice.

It was a map of the United States. All the states were different colors—pink, red, green, blue, yellow. He had his finger on Alabama, which was pink. I said no and moved his finger to West Virginia, which was green.

“No, that’s here,” he said, in a little voice of protest.

I didn’t bother trying to explain that Harpers Ferry was just ten minutes away. Meanwhile, Tyrone was lying on his bed, admiring his drawing. He’d be rich too if he could draw like this, he was saying. I stood up. Through the door I could see Mrs. Sharpe at a table heaped with empty Suzy-Q boxes. The rest of the little kids

had swarmed outside. I could see them through the small window, carrying on in the bare yard. Shanice was not with them.

I went to the doorway and looked around. Our refrigerator at home was rusting in the same place, and we had a St. Joseph's thermometer on the wall, too. Mrs. Sharpe looked up and saw me wandering around.

"Uh, Shanice..." I said.

She had the look of a woman who understood immediately.

Behind me, Tyrone got off the creaky bed. For the first time, I noticed a trapdoor in the corner of the room and a ladder going down. Mrs. Sharpe nodded, and I started over toward it.

"You letting him go down, Mama?" said Tyrone.

I stopped and looked back, my sketchpad in my hands.

"Shanice," the mother called out, "can Josh come down to see you?"

"No!" came her nasty voice through the floor.

Mrs. Sharpe made a gesture for me to go on. As I walked closer to the ladder, Tyrone and his mother came together in the middle of the room. I felt like Neil Armstrong or somebody as I backed down the crude ladder made of two-by-fours.

Below, I could see what looked like a kind of homemade church altar—dozens of pictures of black children on a dresser, surrounded by purple and white candles. Shanice, seeing me coming down, started running her mouth, telling me to get. Her mother yelled down, telling her to behave herself. When I got to the bottom of the ladder, she was standing back by a small bed, looking terrified and infuriated at the same time. I was glad when my hand slipped off the ladder at the last minute and I almost fell. It gave her a reason to laugh. But as soon as I started looking around at all the pictures, she started yelling for me to leave. I looked up the ladder for help.

"You just sit down there and draw her," Mrs. Sharpe told me. Then she called down at an angle. "Baby, you can show it to everyone at school, okay?"

Shanice ran her mouth about that, too. I sat down on the bottom step and put the pad on my lap. She stood glaring at me. In the strange light I saw braids in her hair and wondered how she had changed her hairdo so quickly. They made her look tough, like an African warrior. She called me a fool again, and her mother, watching over me from above, told her to get rid of her attitude.

“So?” she said, arms folded. “You just gonna gawk?”

“I need to come closer.”

“So come closer!”

I sat on a stool by the dresser, out of view of everyone above. It was a small, hard, uncomfortable stool, and I sat clinging to my sketchpad, sneaking glances around. The place looked like a bomb shelter made into a bedroom, then into a miniature church. There were more cheap white crucifixes than I could count. Slowly Shanice sat down, too. She was so light her bed barely moved. It was covered with a white lace blanket I could just hear my mother calling lovely.

“You better not make me no white girl,” she said. “My boyfriend’ll kill you.”

I opened my sketchpad, found myself still holding Tyrone’s chewed-up pencil, and went into drawing mode.

“What?” she said. “What’s wrong with you? Why you looking at me that way?”

“Change . . . change your face.”

She cocked her head. “What?”

“You want me to draw you that way? All frowning?”

With effort, she relaxed the hard lines away. From a portrait standpoint, she’d be easy. Her eyes were perfect almonds, her nose was made up of cute round shapes, and her lips were short and full.

“I can put it in a frame for you,” I said.

“I don’t need no frame. Just draw.”

“Who are all these children?”

“None of your business!”

It was hard concentrating. Every time I glanced at her, I found myself looking at her pretty eyes. They were shining right at me. If not her eyes, her smooth brown skin, or her braids. She had a perfect face, like one of the models in my Grumbacher Learn-to-Draw books. Why had I never seen this in school before?

“You better be drawing me,” she said, “not just gawking like a fool.”

I started feeling the pressure. I knew that if I didn’t make her the prettiest girl in the world, she’d be the maddest. I gave her long eyelashes and lips perfect from corner to corner. Each line and tone had to be right.

“Why you here? You like poor people?” she said. “You ain’t gonna get no money for this.”

“I know.”

I had no answer, and she made a sour remark about that, too. Then she burst out laughing.

“You like Jenny Wilt?”

I tried to act annoyed.

“Yeah, you do,” she said, her face filling up with a giggle. “Jed and Jenny.”

“Shut up.”

She was surprised that I could be just as sharp-tongued as her.

“You’re a trip,” she said.

As I glanced at her and drew, I could see her studying me back, making her own portrait of me in her mind.

“Why you act all lonely?” she said.

“What? I don’t act ‘lonely.’”

“Yeah, you do. Like a lonely little dog.”

I called her foolish and tried to keep working.

“You scared of something, boy?”

“Shut up.”

She laughed again, then started humming, trying to distract me.

“You don’t recognize that, fool?”

I stopped, a blank look on my face.

“Duh, ‘To Know My Heart,’” she said. “Shasta Q? Damn, you dumb.”

I went on drawing, ignoring her little putdowns. I worked on her lips, her high cheekbones, the bridge of her nose, adding tone and sharp lines. As hard and nasty as she was on the inside, she was prettier than any white girl I had ever seen.

“Now,” I said, sitting up, “how do you want your hair?”

She hopped up off the bed.

“You can draw it the way I want?”

She opened the dresser behind me and started pawing through a heap of wigs—straight brown hair, straight black, brown curls, purplish curls, blonde.

“Turn around,” she said.

I stood, pencil and pad in hand, and turned around.

“Okay,” she said.

When I turned back around, she had on shoulder-length braids. They made her look like an Egyptian girl.

“What?” she said, not liking the look on my face.

She told me to turn around, which I did, and when I turned back, she had on even longer braids, like strands of beads hanging from a doorway. I shook my head.

“Why?”

“Cause they’re for a round face.”

“Round face?”

She sighed and gave me an irritated look.

“Turn back around. Damn, you hard to please.”

This time when I turned back around, she had on some wild hairdo flipped out at the bottom. I shook my head, she sighed even louder, and back around I turned.

As I waited, I had a chance to look at her bedroom. No posters or pictures of boys. Just pictures of children surrounded by unburned candles. Over her bed was a simple wooden crucifix. It reminded me of my mother’s bed.

“Do you know all these kids?” I asked.

“None of your business. Okay, you can look.”

I turned around. She had on a long shag.

“Better,” I said.

“Better?”

“Something shorter.”

She cocked her hips and, with a displeased look, made a little looping motion with her finger for me to turn my back. I didn’t understand why she didn’t want me to see her changing wigs, but she was being fussy about it.

“Are they relatives?” I asked, my back to her.

“No. Okay, you can turn around.”

This time she had on a wavy, collar-length bob she called a bouffant shag. I didn’t like shaking my head, but it wasn’t exactly right, either.

“Damn, boy!”

I assumed the position and stood looking down at her bed covered with beautiful white lace. I thought she must look like a princess sleeping in it.

“Are you a ‘big sister’ or something?”

“Why you like Jenny Wilt?” she asked back. “She’s just a big flirt.”

“She and I were born the same day.”

“That ain’t why.”

“What?”

“Don’t turn around!”

I wondered what she was doing that took so long.

“You a virgin?” she laughed.

I was not too scared of her to tell her to f— off.

“Yeah, you is. Okay, you can turn round.”

“No, I’m not either—what’s that?” I asked, looking at her latest wig.

Right away she didn’t like the look on my face.

“Motown side part—you better like it, boy,” she said.

I stepped over to the drawer as if I owned the place. She watched in amazement as I reached into the drawer of wigs myself and picked out a short, dark, curly wig.

“This would look better,” I said.

She gave me a suspicious look.

“Why?”

“Cause your face is . . .”

She crossed her arms.

“My face is what?”

“Oval.” I waited for her to get nasty, but she didn’t. “This’ll show more of it,” I said.

She gave me a long look.

“Where’d you learn that?” she asked.

I told her about my art book at home, in which it explained how different hair styles complemented, or didn’t complement, the face. She burst out laughing, saying I sounded like one of those funny men in hair salons.

“Virgin,” she called me again.

“I am not.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“No, you are,” I said.

To that, she gave me such a smug grin that I knew it couldn’t possibly be true. It made me sad. I was hoping she was.

We went through a dozen more wigs together. Spiky bangs. Wispy bangs. Bangs plus waves. Wet look. Sassy look. Two-tiered shag.

More shoulder-length braids, and even a wild red wig for fun. She had wigs showgirl long, others ooh-la-la short. Even something she called a “face-framing, cascading straw-curl cut,” which I thought looked like a big blonde pompom. She was going to be a model, she said. She would need all these wigs in her career.

“You been to the museum on River Street?” I asked.

It was the only way I knew how to say Black History Museum without coming out and saying it, which I didn’t feel comfortable saying. She looked at me as if there was no such street. She knew someone on Potomac Street. But she had never heard of River Street.

“They have a famous Afro-Americans gallery,” I said.

She cocked me a look. “*Afro-Americans?* Whitney Houston there, too?”

I didn’t get what was so funny. Speaking of Whitney Houston, she had three of her wigs. She showed me. I shook my head to all three.

“This one,” I said, pointing back to my original choice.

“Short shag? You wanna see my dumb ole’ face, don’t ya?” she said, hands on her hips, wig balled up in her hand.

I nodded, and she made the turn-around motion with her little finger. After a few seconds, she said I could look—and boy, did I look.

“Oh, stop getting all google-eyed, boy. You don’t have to look at me like no fool.”

Her face flashed happiness, embarrassment, confusion, and anger. Some of these looks were wigs, too. I just didn’t know which.

“You failing French?” she said. “I bet you are. They gonna hold you back a grade.”

“I’m not failing.”

“Yes, you is.”

“I’m failing art,” I said.

She stopped and looked at me. “Art? You? For real?”

I didn’t bother with trying to explain. I sat down on the stool again.

“Damn, don’t get all sad about it, Jed,” she said.

She was so hard on me, I almost wanted to laugh. At the same time, the irony was bending in me. She was the prettiest girl I had

ever seen, but she was black, and I had picked on her for years behind her back. And to think, I was liking her now.

I thought of my mother, seeing me down in this bomb shelter of a bedroom on Union Street, playing with a black girl's wigs. I could see my brothers behaving no better about it than Tyrone. I saw every white girl in my school looking at me as if I was doing something to offend the race. Why was I turning my back on the timeless rite of liking one of them instead? The answer was simple—none of them liked me.

"Can you come down to the museum with me?" I asked Shanice.

She cocked her head. "You and me, boy? Just walking right down the street? Like we married?"

"My brother will drive us."

"I ain't gettin' down with you," she said, crossing her arms.

My face blushed so hard it felt hot. I had never heard it put this way.

"I know," I said.

She stood looking at me.

"You know?"

I never expected myself to be so agreeable about something that was so far down some impossible road anyway. She gave me a look of curiosity.

"Why you all nice?"

When I shrugged, she shrugged back, to make fun of me.

"Then you'll go?" I said.

She looked off. "If you *ask*, maybe," she said.

I practically leaped through the ceiling.

"Damn, you weird!" she shot back, trying to hold back a smile.

Weird was good. Weird, in this case, was her funky red wig. I reached down into her drawer, grabbed it, and draped it over my head.

"Get that off!" she said, snatching it back and trying to act mad.

I picked up a black wig and plopped that one on my head instead.

"Look, I look just like you," I said.

She stood there shaking her head. I held a blonde wig above her head. "Now you look just like me," I said.

She grabbed it away from me. "Hey, what about my drawing?"

Again she wasn't talking *black*.

She made me sit and start drawing again. As I worked, giving her perfect hair, I could feel her looking me up and down.

"All you white boys so short?" she asked. "People gonna look at us in school."

I turned to her. "Hey, does Mr. Romine really live in Bolivar?"

"I don't know. Now why you failing art?"

I had no answer. All I could do was shrug. For that, she stood looking at me, head turned to the side.

"You poor?" she asked.

"No!"

"Then why you wear those old shoes? And those ratty pants?"

"Why you wear that stupid shirt?" I shot back, pointing at its oversized black buttons.

"You act poor, boy."

"Shut up!"

"Ooh, *SEN-SI-TIVE* about it, ain't ya?" She turned and looked off. "At least you have 'self-confidence.' Ms. Kerry say I lack it."

"No, you have it."

She turned back to me, surprised I had said this so automatically. I didn't even know what self-confidence was at that moment. I just wanted her to have what I had. Then, as if I had given her self-confidence, she stood, stepped over to me, and touched my hair. She started smiling, saying how soft it was. She had never touched a white boy's hair before. She stood there for some time, too, pulling every lock to its end, her thin brown arm over my head, blue bracelets clicking together and making a tickling sound in my ears. If my body had been the St. Joseph's thermometer upstairs, I would have burst.

Then she looked down at my drawing.

"Wow, that's me. How'd you do that?" she said, leaning down beside me, her wig touching my neck.

I gave her a little demonstration. With the side of my pencil, I shaded an area of her cheek, then rubbed it with my finger, blending an even tone.

"It's like you putting makeup on me or something."

She squeezed onto the stool beside me, not shy about letting part of her touch me. She had perfume on, which made me think of some far-off place.

"Put some here," she said, pointing to a spot on her cheek.

“No, it has to be natural,” I said.

“Here.”

The graphite on my fingertip made a soft tone across her forehead. If I had been drawing a white face, I would have left the area white. Suddenly, she took hold of my hand and turned my finger up to see the pencil graphite on the tip. Then she looked over my whole hand, as if looking for the magic in it.

“You’d be rich doing this,” she said.

“That’d be nice,” I said, my voice dropping off.

She looked over. “You are poor, ain’t ya?”

“Kinda.”

Her forehead pulled up in soft wrinkles, like ridges in the sand.

“Over in fancy *Happers* Ferry?” she said. “For real?”

I nodded and looked around the basement. I was the only white face in this room, in this house, and on this street. Maybe the only white face in this whole town. That meant my little white secret could come out. My family probably had the worst house in historic Harpers Ferry—run-down, embarrassing, and hickish. Ordinarily this was no big deal because there were always black people in Bolivar to put down first. But with me here and with all the whites across town, lies didn’t matter. They were like a suitcase full of Confederate money.

“So where do you live?”

I braced for impact. “Hog Alley.”

“Hog Alley!” Her voice shot up. “You’re kidding? Which house?”

“The yellow one.”

“Down by all them boxcars and that huge pile of coal?”

I nodded, and she shot to her feet. “That place with no windows?”

“It has windows.”

“No, it don’t.” She jabbed her finger into my shoulder. “That place is a dump!”

I laughed so hard that, fearing that the whole house had heard me, I scrunched down and put my hand to my mouth, acting all silly.

“That’s a nasty old house, Jed!” She pushed me off the stool and onto the floor—sketchpad, pencil, and all. “You’re a snob, Josh Connors!” She started pinching and poking at me, and I was laugh-

ing and trying not to pee myself. “My mother got cancer, and you all looking down on people,” she said, digging into my stomach.

“What?” I said, pushing her hands away and sitting up. I was trying not to laugh now. I climbed to my feet. “What, Shanice?”

“Ovarian,” she said in a low voice, with a glance toward the ladder.

I took half a step closer. “Serious?”

She nodded. “She seen three specialists already.”

The planet stopped turning, the house went dark, and my mind folded down to one thought—death. It wasn’t about Harpers Ferry or Bolivar anymore, or whose house was nasty looking, and it certainly wasn’t about art class or even whether I’d fail for the year. The worst part of all, it wasn’t even about her mother’s cancer, either, which it should have been. It was about how mixed up we both were and how every little thing less than death always ended up being more devastating to us.

Then Shanice did something incredible—she threw her arms around me. It was a strong, beautiful hug that squeezed my shoulder blades so hard my arms popped out straight. As quickly, she let go, sat down on the stool, looked off in the opposite direction, and, with her arms draped over her knees, started rocking herself back and forth. When I took too long to put my arm around her, she smacked at me. I deserved that. How to touch someone when it really mattered—this was something my brother’s dirty magazines never taught. And the only time my mother ever touched my father was when he wanted Caladryl on his back.

Tyrone didn’t know about the cancer, she said, sniffing. No one at her church knew, either. Her mother only told her because she was the oldest. As I sat listening, the moment seemed unreal, and I was trying to catch up. She broke into tears, but as quickly her voice rose up in rage.

“My mama already had one surgery, and now it’s back!”

My grandmother had three surgeries, I said, and every time her cancer came back.

I had another chance to hold her, but again my arms were lame. When Shanice turned to me, glassy-eyed, I knew what she was thinking: She may have been poor and black and from Bolivar, but she knew how to put her arms around someone when it mattered.

When I said that maybe her mother would get better, she said that less than one percent survived after the second surgery. She said that some girl at school had a cousin who died in a hospice after three surgeries and two years of chemo.

I watched her step over to her bed, sit down on it with a bounce, fall over on her side, and curl up like a child. I started toward her, but she popped up first.

“So why you come here?” she asked one final time, taking a step toward me. “You never talk to me in school.”

I didn’t like her icy smile or her tone. She knew very well why. Because of my stupid school assignment. That, and what I told her earlier.

But she shifted those damn killer hips again. “Oh, you just come up here by yourself because you ‘know your own heart’? No other reason?” she said, flouncing past. “You as disgusting as me.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No, I ain’t,” she said, rounding her bed and bouncing down on the other side of it. “You disgusting, and you know it. I know your house now.”

I stood glaring at her for the longest time, then turned away. Thousands of kids blurred in my eyes. White crosses did zigzags in the air. She was right. I was disgusting. I didn’t feel good enough to set foot in one house over in Harpers Ferry. Not one! I had searched every street before coming here, looking for just one door to knock on. I walked past fancy house after fancy house, not feeling worthy of approaching one. I ended up two miles up the road, where people wouldn’t look down on me.

Slowly I walked back over to Shanice and sat down on her bed with her.

“So I guess we’re in the same boat,” I said.

“No,” she said, throwing my arm off her, “you in a worse one.”

She hopped up and pulled her shirt down snug, saying she hoped she didn’t get cooties from me. No telling what she might pick up from my ugly old house over in Harpers Ferry.

I was back to glaring again. Nothing worked with her. Not kindness. Not anger. As soon as I thought something was happening between us, she blew up in my face. I couldn’t tell her she was pretty. She’d only get angry and slap at me. I couldn’t tell her she was an angry bitch. She’d slap me for sure then.

“Your mama raised you,” she said. “That’s your problem. Made you like a girl.”

That was one hell of a remark even from her.

“I was sick when I was younger,” I said. “Okay? It’s not my fault.”

She looked back at me. “Sick?”

“Almost died,” I said, turning away.

“For real?”

She started closer. I had set up something dramatic. I had to deliver, and that wouldn’t be easy, considering her brother had been shot four times and was still alive.

“Fever. 108.”

“108!”

“Almost caused brain damage,” I said.

She came over and sat back down beside me. Her little brother Germaine was sick all the time, too. Fevers, earaches, colds. He spent a whole week in the hospital once, she said.

I spent two whole weeks in a hospital in Baltimore. The nurses gave us Curious George books. We watched Joe Bazooka boxing movies. I was in a large room with all kinds of sick kids—blind kids, kids with no arms, kids with cancer, all of us mixed in together. The kid beside me had no legs, I said. His name was Win. I thought that was strange. The unluckiest boy in the world named Win? He bothered me the whole week, asking me to unlock the combination lock on his luggage.

“I still think about him.”

Shanice looked at me as if I was the most pathetic kid in the world.

“You too shy,” she said, feeling my curls.

When I looked at her, something in my face disappointed her again. She stood and stepped off.

“Why you all that way?” she said, looking back, her face all strained up.

She didn’t know the half of it. In the picture window of the wax museum across the street from my house stood a big figure of John Brown, all done up in fury, thrusting a musket. All our lives he had been glaring at our house. We always figured he was enraged with our racist father. In a town famous for being where black freedom started, Dad was begging for it.

"I guess we all a little poor," she finally said. "You have a phone?"

"No."

"Me neither. TV?"

"Yeah."

"We do, too."

I picked up the notepad, sat, and started working again, with her quietly beside me. I wanted to tell her she was easy to make beautiful on paper. She was already beautiful. All I had to do was copy her.

"He looks like my cousin," I said, pointing at the picture of a boy on the end of the dresser.

"What, you have a black cousin?" she laughed.

His name was Anthony McDonald, she said, standing. I stood with her, and together we stood looking at the pictures. There must have been fifty.

"They all kids killed in Anacostia this year," she said.

"Anacostia?"

"Southeast."

I was afraid to ask how. Drive-by shootings. Abuse. Malnutrition.

"You ever light these candles?" I asked.

"I want to," she said. "But Mama say I'd burn the house down." She pointed to a little girl missing her baby teeth. "That's Shanice. Her name Shanice, too."

Standing beside her, I could hear the happiness in her voice. Shanice was a cool name, I said. All the girls down in Harpers Ferry were named Sarah or Emily.

"I go by Shani to my friends," she said.

"Shani," I said.

I pointed at an older boy in a suit.

"Who's he?"

"Brandon Carr."

She named the two boys beside him, Luther Washington and Justin Mennefee, then went on naming them by their first names—*David, Kayla, Jasmine, Destiny*. I looked over at her. She had a strange, peaceful smile.

The names went on and on—*Briana, Ashley, Michael, Anthony*. All these smiling little faces—a boy with a ball cap, a girl our age,

another toddler. All black and all dead. All dead as if because they were black. Suddenly I felt very tired, and a sick feeling ran through me. I had to sit down.

“Now what’s wrong with you?” she snapped.

“Nothing.”

“Why you all red-eyed?”

“I’m not.”

“You don’t know them.”

Still, I was sad, so sad I had to sit down.

“You asked me who they was,” she said, getting upset.

“I know.” I glanced back at the ladder.

“Go ahead leave.”

I wanted to. I wanted out of this basement funeral home, this mausoleum. How could she sleep down here with all these dead kids looking at her? It was as if she was trying to be their mother or something, when her own mother was dying from cancer. It was too morbid to stand.

“Ain’t my fault they dead,” she said, getting more upset.

I was weird, she said, and her boyfriend was going to kill me for being down here, and she wouldn’t go with me to a museum if I was the last boy on earth.

“My mama the one dying!” she all but shouted, her face raked down to the bone in anguish, pictures of dead children ringing her.

“I know,” I pleaded back. “Your mother should talk to my mother.”

She looked tripped up by this and let out an ugly laugh. “Your mother?”

Yes! After dealing with our grandmother’s illness for years, my mother could talk cancer the way I could talk baseball. All of us, even my stupid brothers and hard-ass father, after seeing Grandma turn yellow from cancer and the skin fall off her bones, would have the hearts of Mother Teresa for this family.

But Shani wanted to fight more. “When your mama ever come over into Bolivar?”

It was hopeless. There was too much garbage between us. All I saw was black, and all she saw was white.

“Your mama think we’re trash,” she went on.

“So don’t act like it.”

I caught her hand coming for my face just in time and threw it away like balled up paper.

“I hate you!” she hissed.

Just then, Tyrone’s big black arm came down from above, yanked off her wig, and disappeared up the ladder with it. She screamed and tried to cover her head with her hands, but not before I saw the ugly white scar across her scalp and the mangled hair growing around it. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. It was the ugliest sight—hair and white skin smeared together as if her head was made of melted wax. And where there wasn’t a scar or messed up hair, there were pasted down cornrows that made her head like a boy’s.

She screamed at me to stop gawking, stomped her feet in a crazy fit, all while trying to grab another wig from the drawer. But she ended up putting on the funny red wig, which made the moment worse. She shrieked for me to get out, threw the notebook at me, but hit her dead children pictures instead, scattering them on the floor like cards. Then she really went berserk, flailing her arms, whimpering. I stood petrified. She was like those retarded children in my school who jumped up and down on their desks and peed themselves. When her mother yelled down, wanting to know what was going on, I went on autopilot.

“No, it’s okay, it’s okay,” I called up, doing my best to sound calm. “I’m not finished yet. It’s okay.”

I looked over at Shani and put my finger to my lips. She stood backed up against her bed, half angry, half confused. I picked up the pad and pencil, sat down on the stool again, and started erasing. Before she could scream out that I was ruining her drawing, I put my finger to my lips again. She quickly put on another wig and started gathering up all her precious pictures and putting them back in place on the dresser.

“Shani?” her brother called down.

“Get, Ty,” she said, her wet eyes transfixed on my hands.

“You okay, baby?” her mother called down.

“Yeah,” she said, in a distracted voice, stepping closer to see.

The best thing about Tyrone’s stupid, chewed-up pencil was its big, soft eraser. Spinning the pad on my lap like a piece of pottery, I quickly erased her hair. Keeping the lightest pressure, I was careful not to rough up the texture of the paper. Several times I stopped to blow the paper clean and to turn the eraser to a fresh side.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her coming closer. I knew that since I looked like an expert, she wasn't having another conniption.

"It's okay, it's okay," I kept saying, smiling and nodding.

My heart was pounding for the life of me. I was scared of her, but embarrassed for her, too, and crazy about her all at the same time. She drove pain into me, then knocked it out like a hammer knocking nails out of lumber.

With her hair erased away, I started drawing in cornrows. Another girl in my class had them, so I knew just how they looked. I built little rows of rounded lines. I worked quickly, too, not sure how long I had before she would go crazy again or her mother would call down. Where she had her terrible scar, I drew in full, dark, beautiful braids, flat to the scalp, in perfectly spaced rows around her pretty face. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her peering over my shoulder.

"Don't make 'em too thick," she said.

"I won't," I promised.

She sat down beside me again.

"How you do that?" she said, sniffing.

"I don't know," I said.

"Talent," she said, answering herself.

"My father painted when he was younger."

She looked over.

"But you ain't close to your father?" Her voice was different—light and weak from her little spell.

I shook my head.

"My father hit me," she said.

I looked at her. I couldn't dare kiss her. I couldn't even say something sweet. All I could do was wish.

"Put more here," she said, pointing to a spot.

I nodded and laid the pencil on its side and gave the paper an extra shot of tone. She was tired of wearing wigs, she said. She had to wear them for the rest of her life.

"When?" she said, sniffing.

I looked at her. Her face was relaxed, and she was gazing at the drawing with wonder.

"When what?"

"When are we going? I can go tomorrow—wait," she said, turning to me on the little stool, "what am I gonna see?" She sat with her arms crossed, as if her little fit had left her chilled.

"Paintings," I said.

She looked disappointed again.

"Any pictures?"

"Some."

"Least they got that," she said. I could feel her looking me up and down. "Why you wanna go with me? You can't hold hands with me or nothing."

"Maybe not out in public," I said.

If she could feel my hand, then I could hold her hand. I stopped drawing and took hold of it. It was soft and small. I touched one of her long blue fingernails.

"You're silly," she said, sniffing. She saw me look over at the pictures. "The church gives them out. I just started collecting them. Somebody got to remember them. You gonna let go of my hand?"

On the edge of her bed was a 6-subject Mead notebook as thick as a dictionary. I had seen only one before. The smartest kid in our school carried one.

"Can I look?"

She nodded.

With its deep blue cover and embossed silver logo, it was the opposite of her brother's flimsy notebook with a goofy, canary-yellow cover. On the inside cover was

Shanice L. Sharpe

Harpers Ferry High

10th Grade

I told her she had the prettiest handwriting and ran my fingers over the letters as if they were precious beads. *Analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services is the chief concern of economy as a social science.* Pages and pages of beautiful handwriting. No doodling in the margins, no angry marks, nothing sloppy or silly. In the back, on a page by itself, I caught a glimpse of a poem. In that second, I memorized every word.

Someday I'll fly like the bird I can not see.

Someday I'll love like the heart I can not feel.

Someday I'll smile like the face I have not seen.

Lights were sparkling in the corners of my eyes, and my body felt like a hot air balloon I couldn't keep down. With all my heart I wished I was black, or she was white, or we could stay down here forever.

"Your Mom miss your grandma?" she asked.

I nodded. Life, I thought, was like finger-painting with a hopeless mess of gruesome colors. You kept smudging it around until you got it right.

"What kind of cancer she have?"

I couldn't remember exactly, and that seemed to disappoint her. She looked down at her notebook on my lap.

"Ms. Kerry say I have self-esteem issues—why you smiling like that?"

A black girl could be my first. That was why I was smiling. And if that could happen, anything could. A UFO could land on my head, or my scratchboard project could hang in the National Gallery.

Shani just didn't know how pretty and smart she was, just as Tyrone didn't know what to do with all his size.

"You can be a model," I said, "if you have the guts to do that."

I nodded at the shrine of pictures on her dresser. If she could collect pictures of dead children and sleep with them staring at her all night long, then she was the coolest, bravest person I had ever met. She could move anywhere, become anyone. I told her so, and all anger went out of her eyes.

"You serious?"

"If you can do that," I said.

She looked down.

"I've never been to a museum before," she said, looking down.

I shrugged. It was okay that she lived in Bolivar but had never been down in Harpers Ferry. I had lived in Harpers Ferry all my life but had never been here, I said. She didn't seem to hear, though. She was looking down at the drawing of her with perfect cornrows.

"I know why you draw."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. She just smiled and put her head on my shoulder. I stopped working, and we sat still. Seconds stretched out into minutes. Some time later, there were footsteps above.

"Baby," her mother called down, "we going to the new Piggly Wiggly. You wanna come?"

Shani turned her head up to the ceiling. “No.”

Silence came back down at us. Long seconds of it. I could feel her mother peering down at another angle, trying to see what we were up to. We sat perfectly still on the stool, holding hands, our fingers making sweat in the crevices.

“You sure, baby?”

Shani exploded on her. “Yeah! He still drawin’ me, okay?” It was a boom to put an end to all nosy mothers. Then she looked at me, grinned, and put her finger to her lips.

Another eternity of quiet passed.

“Okay then,” her mother said, moving off. Then she stopped. “Goodbye, Josh—say hello to your mother for me.”

I let go of Shani’s hand, went to the ladder, and looked up.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Sharpe,” I called up.

But she had already moved away.

Upstairs, kids were running in circles, shaking the floor. Doors were being slammed, and Ty was causing trouble. The idiot yelled down to us—“Don’t do nothin’ I would do!” First time the big galoot was funny. But Shani didn’t smile, just told him to shut up.

More door slamming, more house shaking, more hitting and squabbling. Finally, after a stampede down the outside steps, shaking the whole rickety house like a tree house—quiet. It filled this basement room and settled on all the picture frames like the tranquility of evening time. Wigs lay everywhere as though Shani and I had flung off our clothes in great passion for each other. Finally, through the old boards of the house came the sound of a car with no muffler popping to life.

As it pulled off, she and I sat looking at each other. Around us, the walls rose up with a glow from upstairs. It made me think of a night sky over us.

“I haven’t been with a boy either,” she said. “Not the right way, anyway.” She scooted closer and sat with her legs under her. “You wanna see my nipple ring?”

As I nodded, I felt her eyes hook into mine. I watched her unbutton her shirt, her thin, black fingers climbing down the front like a spider. She lifted her moon-white bra over one breast. It was small and brown, and the ring on her nipple, catching the light from above, was a gold angel inside a sunburst. I didn’t have time to get excited or think about what I was seeing.

“You can touch it,” she said.

She rose up on her knees and leaned over me so that her breast was directly level with my eyes. Angel, nipple, and breast bounced like a Christmas tree ornament to the touch of my finger.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, looking up at her.

Her eyes were full with a thousand glints. She sat back slump-shouldered for a moment, then unbuttoned her shirt the rest of the way, and looked at me with the blankest, matter-of-fact expression.