Editor’s Note: Dasani is one of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York City. The New York Times began following her in September 2012, when she was 11 years old and living at the Auburn Family Residence in Brooklyn. Her last name is being withheld to protect her identity.

NEW YORK — She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate.

Slipping out from her covers, the oldest girl sits at the window. On mornings like this, she can see all the way across Brooklyn to the Empire State Building, the first New York skyscraper to reach 100 floors. Her gaze always stops at that iconic temple of brick, its tip pointed celestially, its facade lit with promise.

“It makes me feel like there’s something going on out there,” says the 11-year-old girl, never one for patience. This child of New York is always running before she walks. She likes being first — the first to be born, the first to go to school, the first to make the honor roll.

Even her name, Dasani, speaks of a certain reach. The bottled water had come to Brooklyn’s bodegas just before she was born, catching the fancy of her mother, who could not afford such indulgences. It hinted at a different, upwardly mobile clientele, a set of newcomers who over the next decade would transform the borough.

Dasani’s own neighborhood, Fort Greene, is now one of gentrification’s gems. Her family lives in the Auburn Family Residence, a decrepit city-run shelter for the homeless. It is a place where mold creeps up walls and roaches swarm, where feces and vomit plug communal toilets, where sexual predators have roamed and small children stand guard for their single mothers outside filthy showers.

It is no place for children. Yet Dasani is among 280 children at the shelter. Beyond its walls, she belongs to a vast and invisible tribe of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York, the highest number since the Great Depression, in the most unequal metropolis in America.

Nearly a quarter of Dasani’s childhood has unfolded at Auburn, where she shares a 520-square-foot room with her parents and seven siblings. As they begin to stir on this frigid January day, Dasani sets about her chores.
Her mornings begin with Baby Lele, whom she changes, dresses and feeds, checking that the formula distributed by the shelter is not, once again, expired. She then wipes down the family’s small refrigerator, stuffed with lukewarm milk, Tropicana grape juice and containers of leftover Chinese. After tidying the dresser drawers she shares with a sister, Dasani rushes her younger siblings onto the school bus.

“I have a lot on my plate,” she says, taking inventory: The fork and spoon are her parents and the macaroni, her siblings — except for Baby Lele, who is a plump chicken breast.

“So that’s a lot on my plate — with some corn bread,” she says. “That’s a lot on my plate.”

Dasani guards her feelings closely, dispensing with anger through humor. Beneath it all is a child whose existence is defined by her siblings. Her small scrub-worn hands are always tying shoelaces or dishing out peanut butter sandwiches, taking the ends of the loaf for herself. The bond is inescapable. In the presence of her brothers and sisters, Dasani has no peace. Without them, she is incomplete.

Today, Dasani rides the creaky elevator to the lobby and walks past the guards, the metal detector and the tall, iron fence that envelops what she calls “the jail.” She steps into the light, and is met by the worn brick facade of the Walt Whitman projects across the street.

She heads east along Myrtle Avenue and, three blocks later, has crossed into another New York: the shaded, graceful abode of Fort Greene’s brownstones, which fetch millions of dollars.

“Black is beautiful, black is me,” she sings under her breath as her mother trails behind.

Dasani suddenly stops, puzzling at the pavement. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior on this side of Myrtle.

“Worlds change real fast, don’t it?” her mother says.

In the short span of Dasani’s life, her city has been reborn. The skyline soars with luxury towers, beacons of a new gilded age. More than 200 miles of fresh bike lanes connect commuters to high-tech jobs, passing through upgraded parks and avant-garde projects like the High Line and Jane’s Carousel. Posh retail has spread from its Manhattan roots to the city’s other boroughs. These are the crown jewels of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s long reign, which began just seven months after Dasani was born.

In the shadows of this renewal, it is Dasani’s population who have been left behind. The ranks of the poor have risen, with almost half of New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line. Their traditional anchors — affordable housing and jobs that pay a living wage — have weakened as the city reorders itself around the whims of the wealthy.

Long before Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio rose to power by denouncing the city’s inequality, children like Dasani were being pushed further into the margins, and not just in New York. Cities across the nation have become flash points of polarization, as one population has bounced back from the recession while another continues to struggle. One in 5 American children is now living in poverty, giving the United States the highest child poverty rate of any developed nation except for Romania.

This bodes poorly for the future. Decades of research have shown the staggering societal costs of children in poverty. They grow up with less education and lower earning power. They are more likely to have drug addiction, psychological trauma and disease, or wind up in prison.

Dasani does not need the proof of abstract research. All of these plights run through her family. Her future is further threatened by the fact of her homelessness, which has been shown, even in short spells, to bring disastrous consequences.

Dasani’s circumstances are largely the outcome of parental dysfunction. While nearly one-third of New York’s homeless children are supported by a working adult, her mother and father are unemployed, have a history of arrests and are battling drug addiction.
Yet Dasani’s trials are not solely of her parents’ making. They are also the result of decisions made a world away, in the marble confines of City Hall. With the economy growing in 2004, the Bloomberg administration adopted sweeping new policies intended to push the homeless to become more self-reliant. They would no longer get priority access to public housing and other programs, but would receive short-term help with rent. Poor people would be empowered, the mayor argued, and homelessness would decline.

But the opposite happened. As rents steadily rose and low-income wages stagnated, chronically poor families like Dasani’s found themselves stuck in a shelter system with fewer exits. Families are now languishing there longer than ever — a development that Bloomberg explained by saying shelters offered “a much more pleasurable experience than they ever had before.”

Just three days before the mayor made that comment at a news conference in August 2012, an inspector at Auburn stopped by Dasani’s crowded room, noting that a mouse was “running around and going into the walls,” which had “many holes.”

“Please assist,” the inspector added. “There is infant in room.”

Dasani was about to start sixth grade at a promising new school. This would be a pivotal year of her childhood — one already marked by more longing and loss than most adults ever see.

A tangle of three dramas had yet to unspool.

There was the question of whether Dasani’s family would remain intact. Her mother had just been reunited with the children on the condition that she and her husband stay off drugs. The city’s Administration for Children’s Services was watching closely. Any slips, and the siblings could wind up in foster care, losing their parents and, most likely, one another.

The family’s need for a home was also growing desperate. The longer they stayed in that one room, the more they seemed to fall apart. Yet rents were impossibly high in the city, and a quarter-million people were waiting for the rare vacancy in public housing. Families like Dasani’s had been leaving the state. This was the year, then, that her parents made a promise: to save enough money to go somewhere else, maybe as far as the Pocono Mountains, in Pennsylvania.

Dasani could close her eyes and see it. “It’s quiet and it’s a lot of grass.”

In the absence of this long-awaited home, there was only school. But it remained to be seen whether Dasani’s new middle school, straining under budget cuts, could do enough to fill the voids of her life.

For children like Dasani, school is not just a place to cultivate a hungry mind. It is a refuge. The right school can provide routine, nourishment and the guiding hand of responsible adults.

But school also had its perils. Dasani was hitting the age when girls prove their worth through fighting. And she was her mother’s daughter, a fearless fighter.

She was also on the cusp of becoming something more, something she could feel but not yet see, if only the right things happened and the right people came along.

Dasani is a short, wiry girl whose proud posture overwhelms her 4-foot-8 frame. She has a delicate, oval face and luminous brown eyes that watch everything, owl-like. Her expression veers from wonder to mischief. Strangers often remark on her beauty — her high cheekbones and smooth skin — but the comments never seem to register.

What she knows is that she has been blessed with perfect teeth. In a family where braces are the stuff of fantasy, having good teeth is a lottery win.

On the subway, Dasani can blend in with children who are better off. It is an ironic fact of being poor in a rich city that the donated garments Dasani and her siblings wear lend them the veneer of affluence, at least from a distance. Used purple Uggs and Patagonia fleeces cover thinning socks and fraying jeans. A Phil & Teds rain cover, fished from a garbage bin,
protects Baby Lele’s rickety stroller.

(BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Dasani tells herself that brand names don’t matter. She knows such yearnings will go unanswered, so better not to have them. But once in a while, when by some miracle her mother produces a new pair of Michael Jordan sneakers, Dasani finds herself succumbing to the same exercise: She wears them sparingly, and only indoors, hoping to keep them spotless. It never works.

Best to try to blend in, she tells herself, while not caring when you don’t.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

She likes being small because “I can slip through things.” In the blur of her city’s crowded streets, she is just another face. What people do not see is a homeless girl whose mother succumbed to crack more than once, whose father went to prison for selling drugs, and whose cousins and aunts have become the anonymous casualties of gang shootings, AIDS and domestic violence.

“That’s not gonna be me,” she says. “Nuh-uh. Nope.”

Dasani speaks with certainty. She often begins a sentence with “Mommy say” before reciting, verbatim, some new bit of learned wisdom, such as “camomile tea cures a bad stomach” or “that lady is a dope fiend.” She likes facts. She rarely wavers, or hints at doubt, even as her life is consumed by it.

When strangers are near, Dasani refers to Auburn as “that place.” It is separate from her, and distant. But in the company of her siblings, she calls it “the house,” transforming a crowded room into an imaginary home.

In reality, Auburn is neither. The forbidding, 10-story brick building, which dates back almost a century, was formerly Cumberland Hospital, one of seven public hospitals that closed because of the city’s 1970s fiscal crisis.

In 1985, the city repurposed the former hospital into a shelter for families. This was the dawn of the period known as “modern homelessness,” driven by wage stagnation, Reagan-era cutbacks and the rising cost of homes. By the time Bloomberg took office in 2002, New York’s homeless population had reached 31,063 — a record for the city, which is legally obligated to provide shelter.

Among the city’s 152 family shelters, Auburn became known as a place of last resort, a dreaded destination for the chronically homeless.

City and state inspectors have repeatedly cited the shelter for deplorable conditions, including sexual misconduct by staff members, spoiled food, asbestos exposure, lead paint and vermin. Auburn has no certificate of occupancy, as required by law, and lacks an operational plan that meets state regulations. Most of the shelter’s smoke detectors and alarms have been found to be inoperable.

There are few signs that children live at Auburn. Locked gates prevent them from setting foot on the front lawn. In a city that has invested millions of dollars in new “green spaces,” Auburn’s is often overrun with weeds.

Inside, prepackaged meals are served in a cafeteria where Dasani and her siblings wait in one line for their food before heading to another line to heat it in one of two microwaves that hundreds of residents share. Tempers fly and fights explode. The routine can last more than an hour before the children take their first bite.

The family’s room is the scene of debilitating chaos: stacks of dirty laundry, shoes stuffed under a mattress, bicycles and coats piled high. To the left of the door, beneath a decrepit sink where Baby Lele is bathed, the wall has rotted through, leaving a long, dark gap where mice congregate.

A few feet away, Dasani’s legally blind, 10-year-old sister, Nijai, sleeps on a mattress that has come apart at the seams, its
rusted coils splayed. Hand-washed clothes line the guards on the windows, which are shaded by gray wool blankets strung from the ceiling. A sticky fly catcher dangles overhead, dotted with dead insects.

(BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

There is no desk or chair in the room — just a maze of mattresses and dressers. A flat-screen television rests on two orange milk crates.

To eat, the children sit on the cracked linoleum floor, which never feels clean no matter how much they mop. Homework is a challenge. The shelter’s one recreation room can hardly accommodate Auburn’s hundreds of children, leaving Dasani and her siblings to study, hunched over, on their mattresses.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Sometimes it feels like too many bodies sharing the same air. “There’s no space to breathe ’cause they breathe up all the oxygen,” Dasani says.

She carves out small, sacred spaces: a portion of the floor at mealtime, an upturned crate by the window, a bathroom stall.

The children spend hours at the playgrounds of the surrounding housing projects, where a subtle hierarchy is at work. If they are seen enough times emerging from Auburn, they are pegged as the neighborhood’s outliers, the so-called shelter boogies.

Nothing gnaws at Dasani more.

A mucus-stained nose suggests a certain degradation, not just the absence of tissues, but of a parent willing to wipe or a home so unclean that a runny nose makes no difference. Dasani and her siblings can get hungry enough to lose their concentration in school, but they are forever wiping one another’s noses.

When Dasani hears “shelter boogies,” all she can think to say is what her mother always tells her — that Auburn is “just a pit stop.”

“But you will live in the projects forever, as will your kids’ kids, and your kids’ kids’ kids.”

She knows the battle is asymmetrical.

The projects may represent all kinds of inertia. But to live at Auburn is to admit the ultimate failure: the inability of one’s parents to meet that most basic need.

Dasani ticks through their faces, the girls from the projects who might turn up at this new school. Some are kind enough not to gossip about where she lives.

The others might be distracted by the sheer noise of this first day — the start of sixth grade, the new uniform, the new faces. She will hopefully slip by those girls unseen.

She approaches the school’s steps on a clear September morning. Fresh braids fall to one side of her face, clipped by bright yellow bows. Her required polo and khakis have been pressed with a hair straightener, since Auburn forbids irons.

Her heart is pounding. She will be sure to take a circuitous route home. She will focus in class and mind her manners in the schoolyard. She has only to climb those steps.

Minutes pass.

“Come on, there’s nothing to be scared about,” her 34-year-old mother, Chanel, finally says, nudging Dasani up the stairs.

She passes through the metal detector, joining 507 other middle and high school students at the Susan S. McKinney Secondary School of the Arts.
Housed in a faded brick building two blocks from Auburn, McKinney is a poor-kids’ version of La Guardia Arts, the elite Manhattan public school that inspired the television series “Fame.” Threadbare curtains adorn its theater. Stage props are salvaged from a nearby trash bin. Dance class is so crowded that students practice in intervals.

An air of possibility permeates the school, named after the first African-American woman to become a physician in New York state.

There is Officer Jamion Andrews, the security guard who moonlights as a rap lyricist, and Zakiya Harris, the dance teacher who runs a studio on the side. And there is Faith Hester, the comedic, eyelash-battling humanities teacher who wrote a self-help book titled “Create a Life You Love Living” and fancies her own reality show.

The children also strive. Among them is a voice that periodically lifts the school with a “Madama Butterfly” aria. When the students hear it, they know that Jasmine, a sublimely gifted junior, is singing in the office of the principal, Paula Holmes.

The school matriarch closes her eyes as she listens. It may be her only tranquil moment.

Holmes is a towering woman, by turns steely and soft. She wears a Bluetooth like a permanent earring and tends toward power suits. She has been at McKinney’s helm for 15 years and runs the school like a naval ship, peering down its gleaming hallways as if searching the seas for enemy vessels.

Students stammer in her presence. She leaves her office door permanently open, like a giant, unblinking eye. A poster across the hall depicts a black man in sagging jeans standing before the White House, opposite President Barack Obama. “To live in this crib,” the poster reads, “you have to look the part.”

McKinney’s roots run deep. Dasani’s own grandmother studied there as a girl. Most of the middle school students are black, live in the surrounding projects and qualify for free or reduced meals. They eat in shifts in the school’s basement cafeteria, watched over by the avuncular Frank Heyward, who blasts oldies from a boombox, telling students, “I got shoes older than you.”

For all of McKinney’s pluck, its burdens are great. In the last six years, the city has cut the school’s budget by a quarter as its population declined. Fewer teachers share a greater load. After-school resources have thinned, but not the needs of students whose families are torn apart by gun violence and drug use. McKinney’s staff psychologist shuttles between three schools like a firefighter.

And now, a charter school is angling to move in. If successful, it will eventually claim McKinney’s treasured top floor, home to its theater class, dance studio and art lab. Teachers and parents are bracing for battle, announced by fliers warning against the “apartheid” effects of a charter co-location.

Dasani knows about charter schools. Her former school, P.S. 67, shared space with one. She never spoke to those children, whose classrooms were stocked with new computers. Dasani’s own school was failing by the time she left.

At McKinney, Dasani quickly draws the notice of the older students, and not because she is short, though the nickname “Shorty” sticks. It is her electricity. When they dote on her, she giggles. But say the wrong thing and she turns fierce, letting the four-letter words fly.

It is still September when Dasani’s temper lands her in the principal’s office.
“Please don’t call my mother,” Dasani whispers.

Holmes is seated in a rolling pleather chair held together by duct tape. She stares at the anguished girl. She has been at McKinney long enough to know when a child’s transgressions at school might bring a beating at home.

The principal slowly scoots her chair up to Dasani and leans within inches of her face.

“OK,” she says softly. “Let’s make a deal.”

From that day forward, Dasani will be on her best behavior. In turn, Holmes will keep what happens at school in school.

With that, she waves Dasani off, fighting the urge to smile. She can’t help but like this feisty little girl.

Dasani closes her eyes and tilts her head toward the ceiling of her classroom. She has missed breakfast again.

She tries to drift. She sees Florida. For a child who has never been to the beach, television ads are transporting. She is walking in the sand. She crashes into the waves.

“Dasaaaaaanii!” her teacher sings out.

She opens her eyes.

There is Hester, batting those lashes.

Both she and another teacher, Kenya Mabry, were raised in the projects. They dress and talk with a polish that impresses Dasani, who studies them.

Hester is also watching Dasani. She does not yet know where Dasani lives, or how hungry she gets. But Hester finds two things striking: how late she arrives some mornings and how capable this girl is in spite of it. Without even trying, she keeps up.

Dasani possesses what adults at McKinney consider an intuitive approach to learning, the kind that comes when rare smarts combine with extreme life circumstances. Her intelligence is “uncanny” and “far surpasses peers her age,” one counselor writes. “Student is continuously using critical analysis to reflect upon situations and interactions.”

Holmes, the principal, is also taking note. She can already see in this “precocious little button” the kind of girl who could be anything — even a Supreme Court justice — if only she harnesses her gifts early enough. “Dasani has something that hasn’t even been unleashed yet,” Holmes says. “It’s still being cultivated.”

For now, Dasani’s most honed skill might be obfuscation. She works hard to hide her struggles, staying quiet as other children brag about their new cellphones or sleepovers with friends.

If there is one place she feels free, it is dance class. When she walks into McKinney’s studio, and the music starts, her body releases whatever she is feeling.

“When I’m happy I dance fast,” she says. “When I’m sad I dance slow. When I’m upset I dance both.”

(BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Dasani has been dancing for as long as she can remember, well before she earned her first dollar a few years ago breakdancing in Times Square. But the study of dance, as something practiced rather than spontaneous, this is new. She is learning to point her toes like a ballerina, and to fall back into a graceful bridge.

Perhaps it is no accident that amid the bedlam of Dasani’s home life — the missed welfare appointments and piles of unwashed clothes — she is drawn to a craft of discipline. Here, in this room, time is kept and routines are mapped with precision and focus.

Dasani never tires of rehearsing the same moves, or scrutinizing more experienced dancers. Her gaze is often fixed on a
tall, limber eighth-grader named Sahai.

Sahai is the middle school’s valedictorian. A breathtaking dancer, she has long silky hair and carries herself like a newly crowned queen. She is a girl with enough means to accessorize elegantly. When Dasani looks at Sahai, she is taking the measure of all she is not.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

You can be popular in one of three ways, Dasani’s mother always says. Dress fly. Do good in school. Fight.

The first option is out of the question. While Dasani clings to her uniform, other students wear coveted Adidas hoodies and Doc Marten boots. In dance class, Dasani does not even have a leotard.

So she applies herself in school. “I have a lot of possibility,” she says. “I do.”

Her strongest subject is English, where a poem she writes is tacked to a teacher’s wall.

By October, she is on the honor roll, just as her life at Auburn is coming apart.

It is something of an art to sleep among nine other people. One learns not to hear certain sounds or smell certain smells.

But some things still intrude on Dasani’s sleep. There is the ceaseless drip of that decaying sink, and the scratching of hungry mice. It makes no difference when the family lays out traps and hangs its food from the ceiling in a plastic bag. Auburn’s mice always return, as stubborn as the “ghetto squirrels,” in Chanel’s lingo, that forage the trash for Chinese fried chicken.

Dasani shares a twin mattress and three dresser drawers with her mischievous and portly sister, Avianna, only one year her junior. Their 35-year-old stepfather, Supreme, has raised them as his own. They consider him their father and call him Daddy.

Supreme married Chanel nine years earlier, bringing two children from a previous marriage. The boy, Khaliq, had trouble speaking. He had been trapped with his dead, pregnant mother after she fell down a flight of stairs. The girl, Nijai, had a rare genetic eye disease and was going blind. They were the same tender ages as Dasani and Avianna, forming a homeless Brady Bunch as Supreme and Chanel had four more children.

Two of Dasani’s half-sisters, 7-year-old Maya and 6-year-old Hada, share the mattress to her right. The 5-year-old they call Papa sleeps by himself because he wets the bed. In the crib is Baby Lele, who is tended to by Dasani when her parents are listless from their daily dose of methadone.

Chanel and Supreme take the synthetic opioid as part of their drug treatment program. It has essentially become a substitute addiction.

The more time they spend in this room, the smaller it feels. Nothing stays in order. Everything is exposed — marital spats, frayed underwear, the onset of puberty, the mischief other children hide behind closed doors. Supreme paces erratically. Chanel cannot check her temper. For Dasani and her siblings, to act like rambunctious children is to risk a beating.

By late fall, Chanel and Supreme are fighting daily about money.

It has been years since Supreme lost his job as a barber and Chanel stopped working as a janitor for the parks department. He cuts hair inside the shelter and sells pirated DVDs on the street while she hawks odds and ends from discount stores. In a good month, their combined efforts can bring in a few hundred dollars.

This is not one of those times. Supreme is keeping tight control of the family’s welfare income — $1,285 in food stamps and $1,122 in survivor benefits for his first wife’s death. He refuses to give Chanel cash for laundry.
Soon, all of Dasani’s uniforms are stained. At school, she is now wearing donated clothes and her hair is unkempt, inviting the dreaded designation of “nappy.” Rumors are circulating about where she lives. Only six of the middle school’s 157 students reside in shelters.

When the truth about Dasani emerges, she does nothing to contradict it. She is a proud girl. She must find a way to turn the truth, like other unforeseeable calamities, in her favor.

She begins calling herself “ghetto.” She dares the girls to fight her and challenges the boys to arm-wrestle, flexing the biceps she has built doing pull-ups in Fort Greene Park. The boys watch slack-jawed as Dasani demonstrates the push-ups she has also mastered, earning her the nickname “muscle girl.”

Her teachers are flummoxed. They assume that she has shed her uniform because she is trying to act tough. In fact, the reverse is true.

(A BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

A chilly November wind whips across Auburn Place, rustling the plastic cover of a soiled mattress in a trash bin outside the shelter.

Chanel and Supreme stand nearby, waiting for their children to come from school. They are still short on cash. The children had pitched in $5.05 from collecting cans and bottles over the weekend.

Chanel inspects the mattress. Clean, it might fetch $10. But it is stained with feces. Janitors wearing masks and gloves had removed it from a squalid room where three small children lived, defecating on the floor. Their mother rarely bathed them, and they had no shoes on the day she gathered them in a hurry and left.

“"You can smell it?” Chanel asks Supreme.

“No, I can see it,” he says, curling his lip.

“Those are the people that they need to be calling ACS on,” Chanel says. At the shelter, the abbreviation for the Administration for Children’s Services is uttered with the same kind of alarm that the CIA can stoke overseas.

“Nasty girl,” Chanel says, scrunching her nose.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Everyone knows Chanel. She weighs 215 pounds and her face is a constellation of freckles lit by a gaptoothed smile. She wraps her copper-hued hair in a tubular scarf. The street is her domain. When she walks, people often step to the side — not in deference to her ample frame so much as her magisterial air.

(A BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Chanel is in everyone’s business, scoping out snitches, offering homeopathic remedies, tattling on a girl’s first kiss. A five-minute walk through Fulton Mall can take Chanel hours for all the greetings, gossip, recriminations and nostalgia. She has a remarkable nose for people, sniffing out phoniness in seconds. Those who smile too much are wearing “a frown turned upside down.”

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

She is often spoiling for a fight, or leaving people in the stitches of laughter. While others want the life of the music mogul Jay Z, Chanel would settle for being his pet. “Just let me be the dog. I don’t care where you put me.” When Chanel laughs, she tilts her head back and unleashes a thunderous cackle.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Dasani can detect her mother’s laugh from blocks away. Today, she returns from school lugging a plastic bag of clothes
donated by a security guard at McKinney.

Dasani begins rummaging through the bag. She pulls out a white Nautica ski jacket and holds it up to her shoulders. It is too wide, but she likes it. “It’s dirty,” she says forgivingly.

“Look, Mommy!” she says, modeling her new coat.

“That fits you real nice,” Chanel coos.

Suddenly, Supreme leaps into the air. His monthly benefits have arrived, announced by a recording on his prepaid welfare phone. He sets off to reclaim his gold teeth from the pawnshop and buy new boots for the children at Cookie’s, a favored discount store in Fulton Mall. The money will be gone by week’s end.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM.)

Supreme and Chanel have been scolded about their lack of financial discipline in countless meetings with the city agencies that monitor the family.

But when that monthly check arrives, Supreme and Chanel do not think about abstractions like “responsibility” and “self-reliance.” They lose themselves in the delirium that a round of ice creams brings. They feel the sudden, exquisite release born of wearing those gold fronts again — of appearing like a person who has rather than a person who lacks.

The next day, Dasani goes to school wearing her new Cookie’s boots. Feeling amped, she gets into a verbal spat with some boys in gym class and must spend her lunch hour in the principal’s office.

Holmes glowers at Dasani, who tries to leaven the mood by bragging about her place on the honor roll. The principal is unmoved. Dasani still has a B average.

“I want the highest end of the honor roll,” Holmes says. “I want more. You have to want more, too.”

Dasani stares at her tray. The discussion returns to her behavior in gym class.

“While we care for you, we’re not going to take any crap,” Holmes says. “You understand?”

Trying not to cry, Dasani examines her food — a slice of cheese pizza, chocolate milk, a red apple. She wrinkles her nose. Holmes has seen it before, the child too proud to show hunger.

“Can you hurry up?” Holmes says. “The drama with the pizza is not working for me.”

Silence.

“I’ll feed you,” Holmes says. “I will feed you. You don’t think I’ll feed you? Bring the tray.”

Dasani slowly lifts the pizza slice to her mouth, cracking a smile.

Holmes has seen plenty of distressed children, but few have both the depth of Dasani’s troubles and the height of her promise. There is not much Holmes can do about life outside school. She knows this is a child who needs a sponsor, who “needs to see ‘The Nutcracker,’” who needs her own computer. There are many such children.

Here at school, Holmes must work with what she has.

(BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM.)

“Apples are very good for you,” she says, smiling. “Bananas are, too.”

“I don’t like those,” Dasani says.

“Pretend you like them.”
When Dasani is finished, she brings her empty tray to the principal for inspection. Holmes gestures at Dasani’s milk-stained mouth.

“Fix it,” she says. “Go.”

The tree is covered in Christmas lights that mask the lack of ornaments.

The children gather around it inside a dilapidated, two-story rowhouse in East New York, Brooklyn — the closest thing they have to a home. It belongs to Chanel’s ailing godmother, Sherry, whom the children call Grandma.

Sherry’s day care center once occupied the first floor, where fading decals of Bambi now share space with empty liquor bottles. Chanel’s two unemployed brothers, 22-year-old Josh and 39-year-old Lamont, stay in the dark, musty basement. When the children visit, they spend most of their time upstairs, sleeping on a drafty wooden floor beneath a Roman-numeral clock that is permanently stopped at 2:47.

Sherry’s electricity has been cut, but the tree remains lit and the heat stays on, via a cable illicitly connected to a neighbor’s power supply. Christmas gifts are scarce: coloring books, a train set, stick-on tattoos, one doll for each girl.

A few nights later, the children are roused by shouts and a loud crash. Uncle Josh has punched his hand through a window and is threatening to kill Uncle Lamont.

Josh lunges at his brother with a knife. The men tumble to the floor as Chanel throws herself between them. Upstairs, the children cower and scream.

Dasani calls out orders: “Nobody move! Let the adults handle it!”

Sirens rattle the block. Josh is taken away in handcuffs as an ambulance races Lamont to the hospital with a battered eye. They had been fighting over a teenage girl.

January brings relief, but not because of the new year. It is the start of tax season, when Dasani’s parents — and everyone they seem to know — rush to file for the earned-income tax credit, a kind of bonanza for the poor.

Their tax refunds can bring several thousand dollars, which could be enough to put down a rent deposit and leave the shelter.

On Jan. 7, the family heads to Manhattan for a rare outing. They take the Q train, which barrels high across the East River. The city’s lights shimmer, making Chanel think of opportunity.

They will start looking for a home soon, she says.

“I wanna go somewhere where it’s quiet,” Dasani says.

“I wanna go somewhere where there’s trees,” Chanel says. “I just wanna see a bunch of trees and grass.”

“Daddy say that he gonna buy this house with a lot of land with grass,” Dasani says, “so that each of us would get a part, so that you can do whatever you want with that part of the land.”

Supreme sits far-off, listening to music on his phone. Baby Lele wails.

Suddenly, Chanel spots Chinatown. The children squeal. Dasani mentions a book she read about the Great Wall of China.

“That’s not this town,” Chanel says.

“It’s a big wall though,” Dasani says.

“That’s the real Chinatown,” Chanel says. “This is the New York Chinatown, where they got Chinese people in Popeyes.”

Dasani presses her forehead against the window and cups her hands around her eyes, as if preserving the view for herself.
Opportunity comes rarely, but Dasani is always waiting. She wakes early on Jan. 18, hours in advance of a track competition known for rescuing girls from the ghetto.

She has no running shoes, just a pair of imitation Converseifs. She is unknown in the rarefied world of athletic recruiters and private coaches. But ask anyone in her small corner of Brooklyn, from the crossing guards to the drunks, and they will say two things about this tiny girl with the wayward braids: She is strong like a boy and can run like the wind.

Dasani heads out in the icy cold with her mother and two of her sisters. They walk a mile before arriving at the manicured grounds of the Pratt Institute in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Clinton Hill, which is hosting the Colgate Women’s Games.

The amateur track and field series is a magnet for athletic recruiters, and some of its champions have gone as far as the Olympics. Dasani will compete in the 200-meter dash. She heads to the bathroom to change.

“She got shorts to put on?” one of the organizers asks. Dasani reaches for her leggings.

“Those are the sneakers?” the woman frowns.

Wearing no socks, Dasani ties her rainbow laces and walks to the track. When her number is called, she takes her place among four other girls.

The blank fires and she is off, ahead of the pack.

Win, Dasani tells herself. Win.

At the first bend, she trips and falls behind.

By the second turn, Dasani has caught up with the lead runner.

“Run, Dasani!” Chanel screams. “Run!”

They are in a dead heat for the finish line.

Dasani comes in second. It hardly matters that her time is insufficient to make it past the preliminaries. They leave the stadium feeling euphoric.

“My baby’s going to the Olympics,” Chanel crows. As they walk west along Willoughby Avenue, they talk of finding a trainer. Chanel starts singing her favorite Luther Vandross song, “A House Is Not a Home.”

The girls have heard it enough times to sing along.

A chair is still a chair
Even when there’s no one sittin’ there
But a chair is not a house
And a house is not a home
When there’s no one there
to hold you tight.

They turn north on Carlton Avenue, passing a renovated brick townhouse with sleek, metal window frames.

A skinny brunette is unloading her station wagon. At the sight of Dasani’s family, she freezes. She smiles nervously and moves slowly to her car, grabbing an infant from the car seat.
The mood shifts.

“She thinks we gonna jump her,” Chanel says as she keeps walking. The shelter is only three blocks away.

“Why do they feel like they’re so apart? She’s just two steps away from us. If you got jumped out here, a black man would be the first to save your ass. That’s what I feel like telling her.”

When they reach Myrtle Avenue, Chanel goes searching for a beer at her favorite corner store. Dasani trails her.

Inside, the short-order cook, a Mexican girl, stares at Chanel suspiciously.

“Don’t look at me,” Chanel says.

“You so nice, that’s why I see you,” the girl responds cockily.

“You better watch that grill,” Chanel says. “I don’t want to scare you.”

“You think you scare me?” the girl yells.

“Let’s fight right now!” Chanel shouts.

“Wait for me outside!” the girl calls back.

Chanel moves toward her, reaching for a mop.

“Mommy!” Dasani screams.

The owner, Salim, races toward Chanel.

“I’ll crack her with a stick!” Chanel yells as Salim holds her back.

Dasani is frozen.

“I’m a wait for your ass when you come out,” Chanel says. “What time she get off?”

“You run your mouth,” Salim says, gently leading Chanel away, as he has done before.

As they leave, Dasani turns to the cook.

“She gonna knock you stupid, Chinese lady,” Dasani says.

“Don’t use those words,” Salim cries out. “You’re not supposed to turn out like your mother.”

---

**Most Popular**

**Viewed**