

THE QUARRY

Radio Face

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Ebony Janssen was walking from the train station in her school uniform. She could feel a clammy glide of sweat lubricating the movement of her thighs. In a modest attempt to firm her thighs and put an extra shield between the world and her underpants she wore bike pants underneath her dress. They had rolled up and were now like thick tubes around her legs.

The black lycra soaked the salty moisture and alleviated the premature signs of chafe. She tried to adjust them by pulling at their hems through her uniform.

She had been walking for ten minutes since stepping out of an air-conditioned train and onto the steaming black asphalt platform at Bowen Hills station. She didn't know anyone who caught the train to Bowen Hills. The surrounding streets were lined with industrial buildings and mid-rise office blocks without many windows. She hadn't walked past anyone since leaving the train station, but felt a pang of fear every time a car drove by. She kept her school hat on her head and pulled it down at the front to obscure her face. Her parents thought that she was working on her history assignment in the library after school. Although it wasn't likely that they would drive past her, she kept worrying that someone that she knew might. What would they think about the way she was walking, trying to keep her thighs separated, causing her steps to angle out diagonally?

Two incidents in Ebony's life had taught her that other people noticed her faults. One morning in Grade 3, Ebony had been sitting on the carpet with the rest of her class while Mrs. Wilson shared with them the daily news. When Mrs. Wilson asked Ebony and the other

students to return to their desks, Ebony put her hands on the carpet in front of her, uncrossed her legs and got up from her hands and knees. Brandon Francis noticed the way she used her hands to get up instead of swiftly powering up in an unsupported motion, the way he did with his own lanky frame. Once Ebony returned to full height Brandon sniggered at her, 'That's how fat people get up.' A new concept began to shape itself on Ebony's unmarked psyche. Brandon had just brought it to her attention that she was fat, which was not something she had noticed or believed about herself before, but he had. She now understood from things she had heard in the playground, that fatness equated with ugliness.

The second instance had occurred on the train home one Friday afternoon earlier in the year. Now in Grade 10, Ebony had been standing inside the door of a train, gripping the handrail that hung down in the centre of the carriage entryway. Olivia Johns stood opposite her. They weren't usually companions on the train trip home, but on this particular day, all of their friends had been picked up from school by their parents. Ebony was conscious that Olivia was cooler than she was, and therefore she made an attempt to appear up to date with the latest gossip circulating through their grade. 'Did you hear about the party that boy from St John's had? Apparently some guys from Macarthur High gatecrashed, and then the cops turned up.'

'Yeah, I was there,' Olivia replied. She avoided looking at Ebony by watching some schoolboys sitting down the other end of the carriage. Ebony tried to keep the conversation going. 'Do you know many guys from St John's?' she asked. The only boys Ebony knew were on the soccer team she played on. But she never really spoke to them unless they said something to her first, which wasn't very often.

'A few. I went out with one for a while,' Olivia said, still watching the boys further down the train.

'That's cool.' Ebony hoped that one day she'd go to parties and hang out with some boys.

'Hey, why don't you wash your face?' Olivia turned back and centred her attention on Ebony, looking at her through the metal handrail.

'What? I do.' Ebony's face started to feel warm. The train came to a halt at a station. Losing her footing, she tried to grab onto the handrail and rebalance. She turned back to Olivia and mentally chastised herself for her inability to remain balanced on the train.

'No you don't. You've got blackheads on your nose and pimples on your forehead because your face is dirty. You should start washing your face.' Olivia's eyes scrutinised Ebony's

appearance.

‘But I do,’ Ebony tried to vindicate herself.

Olivia didn’t know that every morning and evening Ebony showered and washed her face with Clearasil. She rubbed the tips of her fingers over the small bumps that littered her face. Each spot was a tiny embodiment of her imperfection. Ebony prayed, she pleaded, and she bargained with God. ‘Please make my skin perfect. I’ll believe in you if you do.’

Ebony’s mother had told her that she would eventually grow out of her pimples, the way she had when she was a teenager. But Ebony couldn’t stop the feeling of disappointment that she experienced when she looked at herself in the mirror, a haunting reminder that what she saw was ugly. If she noticed it, she was certain that everyone else did too.

Now, on this hot afternoon, standing on a corner, Ebony pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and checked the address she’d scrawled on it. 14 Brookes Street.

Looking at her surroundings she concluded that the place she was looking for was just a bit further ahead. She was going to see Dr. Hayward. She wasn’t positive that he was a real doctor. She was only positive that if she had any other options she wouldn’t be walking down an industrial road on her own with her birthday money in her schoolbag.

The front of the building was plain and undistinguished. There were no signs and the windows were all blacked out from within. Ebony noticed three pot plants that were lined up beside the front door. Their leaves were green and supple, signs of excellent care and attention. This was a good omen for her appointment. Ebony walked through the door and saw a man sitting behind the reception desk. She assumed that he must be Julian, the receptionist she had spoken to when making her appointment. Until she spoke with Julian, Ebony hadn’t made an appointment for herself before. When he answered, his voice has been friendly and approachable.

‘Good afternoon. Skin-Deep Clinic. Julian speaking.’

‘Hi. I want to see Dr. Hayward. Please. I have pimples.’

‘Darling, of course. Let me see what I can do for you. I need your name first, please.’

‘Oh, sorry. I’m Ebony. My name is Ebony Janssen. Can Dr. Hayward fix my pimples?’

‘Lovely. Ok Ebony. Dr. Hayward is booked up for the next few weeks. What time of day works best for you?’

‘Umm...I need to see him one day after school. And I have soccer training on Tuesdays and Wednesday afternoons. Oh, and games on Fridays. Is he free on a Monday or a Thursday afternoon? Please. Thank you.’

‘You’re a sporty little thing Ebony. And has anyone ever told you, you have a lovely phone voice? Maybe you could be on radio.’

‘No. They haven’t. Thank you.’

‘Now, I can fit you in to see Dr. Hayward on Thursday 6th November, 4:00pm. Does that work for you Ebony?’

‘Yes. Yes it does. Thank you.’

‘Wonderful! We’ll see you in a few weeks. Take care till then Ebony.’

‘Ok. I will.’

Now, she could put a face to the nice man on the phone. He wore a white shirt, unbuttoned at the top, underneath a navy suit. His glasses were tortoise shell and round, his hair brown and combed back in a perfect wave above his forehead, and he didn’t have any pimples. Ebony approached the desk the way she’d seen her parents do when they arrived at an appointment.

‘Hi, I’m Ebony. I’m here to see Dr. Hayward at four,’ she said.

‘Hello Ebony, you’re the girl with a voice fit for radio. It’s lovely to see you. Take a seat. The doctor will see you shortly.’ Julian’s warm reply lightened Ebony’s apprehension about her appointment.

Ebony found an empty leather chair with wooden arms. In the centre of the room was a large fish tank that stood from floor to ceiling. Ebony watched the fish swim around in their bottled blue ocean while she waited for Dr. Hayward. A harmonic progression of classical music sounded from two speakers that sat on a filing cabinet behind the receptionist’s desk. Ebony didn’t pretend to know about classical music, but she listened to Classic FM frequently. She believed that the calming sounds might relieve the stress that was probably causing her pimples.

Ebony kept a record of the different methods she had used to try and makeover her skin and outward appearance. She started with different soaps, noting which made her outbreaks worse, or which brought slight improvements. She attempted to eliminate soft drinks and lollies from her diet, but very often failed to say no when they were offered to her. She tried drinking

more water, but that only made her have to go to the toilet all the time. She tried to be a better person; hoping people would think she was nice. But none of these approaches rid her of her blemishes.

The waiting room was deserted except for one other patient, a woman asleep with her head crooked back. She was dressed like Ebony's mother: a pearl necklace, white denim skirt with a red polo shirt and matching red loafers. Shortly after Ebony sat down, the woman let out a low moan and slouched back into her chair. The receptionist whispered, 'Never mind Mrs. Tyson, Ebony. She's just coming to after a little procedure.'

'What was her procedure?' Ebony asked, feeling uneasy about how she might find herself after her own appointment.

'I'm afraid I can't say. Patient confidentiality. But really, she's fine.' He stopped working on his computer and looked over at her with reassurance.

Ebony didn't get time to consider Mrs. Tyson's situation any further. Dr. Hayward appeared at the doorway beside the receptionist's desk and called her name. She slung her school bag over her shoulder and followed Dr. Hayward into his office. He ushered Ebony into the seat in front of his desk and sat down opposite her.

Like other doctor's surgeries that Ebony had been in, she noticed that Dr. Hayward had his certificates of qualification hanging on the wall. He looked younger than her parents, but old enough to be an experienced doctor. He was the best-looking man she'd ever spoken to. Ebony thought that Dr. Hayward had probably never had any trouble with pimples on his skin, or if he had, he had obviously been able to cure himself. He had smooth, faultless skin.

Dr. Hayward pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket and held it ready to write. 'Ebony Janssen,' he said, reading her name off the manila folder on the desk between them. 'Yes?' she said, looking at him.

Ebony sat on the doorstep outside her house. The sky was dark and her phone began to buzz in the bottom of her school bag again. She didn't answer. She'd been sitting in the dark for fifteen minutes trying to deny the consequences of her pursuit for beauty. Finally, she resigned to her situation and opened the front door. Her mum rushed down the hallway towards the stairs.

‘Ebony? Is that you?’

‘Yes Mum.’ Ebony kept her head down and took off her school shoes, leaving them beside the door with her school bag. Her mum reached the top of the stairs and looked down at her.

‘Ebony, it’s eight o’clock! Where have you been? God! What happened to your face?’

‘Hi Mum,’ Ebony looked up at her, ‘Sorry I missed your calls. I went and saw a doctor about my pimples. I want to get rid of them.’ Her mum rushed down the stairs, reaching out her hands to hold Ebony’s face.

‘Who? What doctor? Where? How did you get an appointment? What happened to your face? Ebony, it’s all red. Does it hurt?’ She looked at Ebony’s face closely, examining the moist blisters that had appeared.

‘Sort of. I heard a girl at school talking about this doctor, apparently he helped her. I just called up and booked in.’ Ebony, shook herself free of her mother’s hold and started to bend down again, this time removing her socks.

‘Where?’ Her mother bent down, trying to reconnect with her daughter’s gaze.

‘A place in Bowen Hills.’ They both stood up again and looked at each other.

‘Bowen Hills? Ebony! What specialist practices in Bowen Hills?’

‘Dr. Hayward.’ Ebony picked up her bag and started moving up the stairs.

‘I thought you were at the library!’ her mother followed after her, ‘You should have been home hours ago! I’ve called your school! I’ve called your friends! Your father is driving around trying to find you. And you were in Bowen Hills seeing a doctor, who’s burnt your face! Ebony, I’m going to have to take you to a hospital. What else did he do to you?’ Ebony walked into her bedroom at the end of the hallway.

‘Nothing. It’s fine Mum. He said it would be a bit red for a few days, then new skin will form and I won’t have pimples.’ Ebony pulled out her school books and placed them on her desk.

‘A bit red? Ebony what did he use? What possessed you? Why didn’t you tell me? I could have gone with you.’ Her mother took Ebony’s lunchbox as she handed it to her.

‘Mum, I’ve asked you for help before, but you just said it would be fine. It’s not fine. I hate my face. I hate the way I look. And you don’t seem to care.’

‘Ebony, what am I supposed to do?’ Her mother reached out to move strands of hair that had become stuck to Ebony’s blisters.

‘Whatever.’ Ebony brushed her away, sat down at her desk, and started flicking through her schoolbooks to do her homework.

She was copying notes from the blackboard at the end of her German class when someone placed a note on her desk while they walked past. A lined piece of paper had been folded to half the size of a business card, and her name was written on the front in a fancy cursive. She grabbed it and put it in her pocket, and quickly scrawled the last of the notes into her exercise book.

Once she was back at her locker, Ebony opened the letter and glanced first at the bottom to see who it was from. Olivia Johns. Unease gripped Ebony’s stomach. She couldn’t separate herself from the shame and embarrassment the thought of Olivia caused her to feel. Ebony didn’t have pimples anymore, what would Olivia say was wrong with her now?

Hi Ebony,

How are you? You must be really good at German, you write down all the notes! Frau Martin is so boring. Anyway, we haven’t really chatted in a while, but I wanted to tell you I think you look really pretty lately. I’m not sure what you’re using on your face, but it’s really working for you! My friends and I sit in the second train carriage from the front on the way home, you should come and join us this afternoon, it would be good to catch up!

Don’t dog me!

Xo Olivia J.

Ebony folded up the letter and put it in her locker. She turned around and surveyed the lunchtime commotion in the locker room. Girls were rushing in to drop off their books and grab their lunch. Everyone wanted to make the most of the break with their friends. Ebony saw Olivia over the far side of the room. She was leaning against a locker, eating an apple

while she waited for one of her cool friends to get her own skinny girl lunch. Ebony thought of the sausage sandwich in her lunchbox that she'd been waiting all day to eat. Olivia and her friends existed on a diet of fruit and vegetables. But if ever they strayed, it was common knowledge that they'd go and vomit up their indulgences in the bathroom. Olivia was looking at Ebony. Ebony looked away and then looked back at her. Olivia was still looking at her. Ebony felt like it was a challenge, a new chance to prove she was cool. Ebony wondered if she should walk over and say something. She felt awkward and hesitant. What would she say? 'Thanks for your letter. It's nice that you think I'm pretty now. I went through a lot of pain to look like this. There are parts of my cheeks that I can't feel anymore and my parents think I need to see a counselor because they don't know how to handle me.' Or, 'Hi Olivia, I guess you know I wash my face now. Can you introduce me to some of the boys you know from St. Johns?'

No, she thought, that would sound too desperate. Ebony was still scared of Olivia; her clear skin hadn't changed that. Olivia continued looking at her. Ebony turned back towards her locker and got out her sausage sandwich. When she turned back Olivia was walking away with her friend. Ebony felt relief. She couldn't be Olivia's friend; she'd have to give up her sandwiches, and her friends. And somehow, she felt that would only be the start.