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Shalaby, Section 2

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*Part One*

Forest School

FOR NEARLY FIFTEEN YEARS, Jane Norbert and Nancy Beverly have worked as partner teachers in adjacent classrooms at Forest Elementary School. Winding suburban roads, framed on both sides by large houses and thick patches of trees, lead to the school. Upon entering the school building, visitors are welcomed by the bright and colorful works of young artists—self-portraits done in collage, insects created with computer software, kites designed to test children's understanding of symmetry. Security consists of checking in at the main office and wearing a neon sticky badge, and there is often a crowd gathered around the sign-in sheet since scores of parents seem frequently to have reasons to stick around during the day.

Fierce advocates of multi-age classrooms, Mrs. Norbert and Mrs. Beverly teach a mix of first and second graders, who are with them for two years. They are educational veterans, each having taught for almost two decades now, and they are not only professional collaborators but also extraordinarily close friends. Though a door connects one classroom to the other, it almost always remains open. Both teachers and their students move fluidly between the two-in-one learning space, and visitors always know to check both rooms in search of any particular child.

The only time the connecting door will close is in the rare instance when a whole-class lesson is taking place, one in which quiet and focused concentration are required in separate areas. Then Mrs. Norbert has no choice but to shut that door so she can be heard over Mrs. Beverly's voice on the other side of the wall. Mrs. Beverly is loud. Her voice is strong and powerful, as is her physique. She stands tall and straight, a white woman with long, thick blond hair and a distinctive sense of style. Bright colors in bold combinations are accented by interesting and eye-catching accessories—a leather belt with a deep turquoise stone in its center; dangling earrings made by Indian artisans with recycled materials; distinctive shoes with a high wedge or multiple straps; a necklace featuring a beetle preserved in a glass oval.

Mrs. Beverly's athletic build is the result of her deep love of the outdoors and all things physical. She is a lifelong swimmer and a hiker, a nature aficionado and outdoor expert who can easily identify any plant, seed, or animal print left in dirt or snow. After two years in her class, the seven-year-olds who leave for third grade inevitably share her knowledge and passion. "Asiatic bittersweet," a second grader tells me on one of the many nature walks we take as a class in the surrounding woods. Pointing with disapproval to these climbing vines of bittersweet, he tells me, "Those will strangle that tree. They need to be cut."

Mrs. Beverly's physical presence—confident, striking, powerful—matches her tone in the classroom. Her many years of experience bolster her identity as a master teacher, and her leadership within the school and at the district level is well established. She and Mrs. Norbert are the grade-level liaisons on many committees, and they often co-lead professional development sessions for other teachers. Mrs. Beverly has a clear vision and set of values embedded in her approach to curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom management—and she does not waver in her defense of them. Mrs. Beverly is not

to be trifled with. Everyone understands this, including kids, their parents, other teachers, and the administrators.

Mrs. Norbert, by contrast, though equally firm in her values and beliefs, has a softer style. A mother of two children who are students at the school, she has a more empathetic relationship to the community of parents, and a slightly higher threshold of patience for children who step out of line. But in no way is she soft. Like Mrs. Beverly, she has a strong presence as the leader and authority of her classroom space. She is also white, with a short bob of light brown hair and a more casual choice of dress—usually khakis or chino pants with a floral or solid long-sleeved T. Mrs. Norbert is a talented artist and a perfectionist. The charts she creates during a lesson are carefully and meticulously drafted. She keeps white-out tape at the side of her easel to immediately address errors, and she writes carefully and neatly, always thinking about the end product as she works to construct something worthy of her walls. Her hanging alphabet is hand-drawn, her calendar a beautifully constructed wood creation.

Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Norbert and Mrs. Beverly do not run traditional classrooms in which children are seated at desks, working independently. Despite an educational climate that increasingly scripts curricula through prepackaged materials and demands the standardization of teaching and learning, this veteran pair has managed to continue to color outside of those lines. Their status as master teachers, as well as the relative freedom they enjoy in the context of an affluent, well-performing suburban school, affords them the opportunity to more or less do as they please.

So, in keeping with their graduate-level training—which included a great deal of emphasis on children with special needs—as well as their personal philosophies about how children best learn, the curriculum and pedagogy they use are multisensory and multimodal. Through “studies”—lengthy units around a theme that

integrate content areas—these teachers organize a rich curriculum for children. Within the course of a study, children are required to read and to write, to sing and to dance, to draw and to paint, to build and to create, to count and to measure, to jump and run and speak, and to listen and perform and reflect.

These are generally bustling, messy, deeply active classrooms in which children largely work together. Students travel from station to station across the two rooms for hours of the school day—grinding corn by hand during a study of indigenous peoples, writing myths during Greek study, comparing and contrasting Western and Eastern notions during Dragon study, stitching saris during a study inspired by Mrs. Beverly's recent travel to India. There are watercolors and music, cooking materials and objects for sewing, and books upon books.

Mrs. Beverly's classroom, in particular, looks lived-in; there are piles of stuff everywhere, whole tables covered with materials and disorganized bins, scraps of paper all over the floor. Mrs. Norbert's is more carefully monitored for neatness. But both teachers have one clear and unobstructed spot in their rooms: director's chairs at the front with their names stitched into the canvas.

There is no mistaking who is in charge.

Despite the general hustle and bustle, there are also many times when the young learners are required to sit still, silently and patiently, for a read-aloud or a share-around, sometimes with all fifty children in one crammed space. They often sit for more than an hour straight, pretzel-style on the rug, with very clear, even rigid, expectations for their behavior. *Sit up straight. Don't fuss with things in your hands. Fold your legs in. Don't dare interrupt.* The children are being trained as both audience and presenters, and they are actively coached in these roles. When six-year-old Carmen stretches her arms in an awkward way while timidly presenting her work, she is repeatedly coached—in front of all forty-nine of the other children and by both teachers in tag-team fashion—to “stop it with

the arms," to "speak up," to "stop making that face." When another child walks back to his spot with a serious hunch in his shoulders and arms dragging at his sides, he is made to return to the center of the circle, walk again, and yet again, until he is upright to his teachers' satisfaction.

High expectations for behavior are coupled with high levels of academic rigor. These are teachers who talk to and treat young learners as fully capable beings. Their read-alouds are often chapter books of more than three hundred pages intended for an older audience in which vocabulary is advanced, story lines are complex, and the required inferences are subtle. The small children are deeply engrossed in these lengthy stories, eagerly awaiting read-aloud time and often begging to continue when time is up. Ongoing, often informal comprehension instruction supports their capacity to understand the works. "See, here's where you really have to do the heavy lifting of reading," says Mrs. Beverly during one read-aloud session. "You have to put together everything you know about this character's personality to understand this action, this individual's temerity."

A rich, rigorous, and engaging curriculum that values creativity and multiple ways of knowing is juxtaposed with a consistent and sometimes harsh reminder that there are rigid rules, norms, codes of behavior, that mustn't be challenged if one wants to be successful in this setting. Both teachers regularly use public scolding and high-volume redirection, and Mrs. Beverly is particularly unapologetic about her choice of a harsh management style. To explain it, she says, "I have to sort of bring them into a place where their behavior is commensurate with expectations of the classroom because this is a white-bread Americana school."

Forest is, indeed, a white-bread American school. There is a handful of children of color in each classroom, generally no more than three in a class of twenty-five. There is not a single teacher of color, nor any staff members, save one member of the janitorial

team. The surrounding community is home to a small liberal arts college, where 66 percent of the adult population holds an advanced degree beyond a bachelor's and just 2 percent of families live below the poverty line. Generally, the children come from well-resourced families in which it is common for only one parent to work.

There are clear ways of being in this school space, cultural norms and codes that signal upper-class academia and white professionalism, for children and teachers alike. Those who cannot or will not adhere to these standards will inevitably be flagged as problematic. This is the case for both Zora and Lucas, the two children whose portraits follow.

Zora

## On Being Out-Standing

### *Take the First Step*

"This way to my room," says Zora Williams, authoritatively leading me to the second floor of her house. "Try to hurry." A wide, tall staircase leads from one level to the next, and Zora's mom has painted a phrase on each step—a collection of fourteen altogether, an explicit code of conduct that the family sees each day. *Love yourself. Express yourself. Be fearless. Do your best. Keep your promises. Stand tall. Don't be afraid to apologize. Say I love you.*

Appropriately, the first stair reads, *Take the first step*. I am visiting Zora at home in the first week of summer, after many long months of seeing her at school. My first day with Zora—our first step together in this project—was her first day of second grade. We were both late. I was hustling through the hallway trying not to spill my coffee and she was running just ahead of me in her shiny new Nikes—black slip-ons with a neon pink swoosh. She moved quickly, tall for her age, and lean. But her movement was more wild than graceful: elbows out, each pace dramatic and exaggerated, like a cartoon character being chased through thick brush.

She was dressed for a special occasion that day. Her hair was in a collection of tight twists with multicolored rubber bands, and



someone had taken great care to create a perfect zigzag part down the center. She'd donned a zip-up green hoodie with a matching pink tennis dress. Bright brown eyes were shining behind funky purple eyeglasses.

It was impossible not to find her adorable.

Zora throws her backpack hastily on a hook and darts inside the classroom. She is familiar with the room since she spent the year prior with Mrs. Beverly as well, but half the crop of children will be new as incoming first graders. She scans the group, as I do, and I wonder what she's noticing or looking for. I can't help but see that hers is the only brown face in a sea of white. She has a gorgeous caramel complexion—a blend of her Puerto Rican mother and African American father. Here, she stands out, but her skin color isn't the only reason. The other children are already seated together on the rug listening to the teacher, and they all turn to stare at the latecomer. Mrs. Beverly stands up from her director's chair and beelines over to Zora, giving a quick welcome and instructions. In her first five minutes at school, attention has already been drawn to Zora Williams.

Considering how much attention she was paid during kindergarten and first grade, so much of it negative, I wonder if there will be very much new about this year.

Zora is asked to add her vote to the class survey, part of the morning ritual in which a question is posed for children to consider: *How did you feel when you woke up this morning?* The options for a response are *excited*, *nervous*, *both*, or *other*. Eleven children are excited. One is nervous. "What could *other* be?" asks Zora, interrupting the class discussion already in progress. "You mean angry? Or maybe lazy?" I fear the interruption will result in a negative consequence, but to my surprise Mrs. Beverly responds by engaging the other children for their ideas.

"You could be just plain scared," offers one first grader.

"I was crying," says another.

The first day of school, like a holiday, is often filled with much ritual and emotion. In some households, outfits are carefully chosen the night before, and shiny new lunch boxes and sneakers sit at front doors, sometimes for several days to build anticipation. Photos are taken, capturing that quintessential image of a tiny person with a giant backpack, a big smile with holes where baby teeth have fallen out.

But in many other households, the first day of school is a day of dread and nerves. For the families of children who struggle, battling daily with behavior problems or academic frustration, early September is a difficult time. As Zora places her vote on *excited*, I wonder how she and her family have really been feeling in the days leading up to this first step.

I met Zora, briefly, during the previous school year when I was supervising a student-teaching intern in Mrs. Beverly's classroom. The first time I visited I opened the classroom door right into the back of a small child—Zora Williams sitting outside of the group during a time-out for noncompliance. I knew the intern and teacher were concerned about this child, but seeing this one brown face (further) excluded from her peers made my stomach tight. She looked alone, and so very different.

A full year later, there had been much growth. Zora had grown. Mrs. Beverly's knowledge of Zora had grown. The relationship between the two of them had grown. I had hoped this might mean a new beginning for everyone. Yet, on just this first day of school, the number of times Zora's name was spoken by Mrs. Beverly suggested another challenging year lay ahead.

"Zora, can you stand up please so I can see your face?"

"Zora, are those Legos cleaned up?"

"Zora, you're starting to talk again."

"Zora, this is the third time I've had to ask you to come here."

"Zora, I'd hate to take your recess on the first day of school."

"Zora, you're the only person whose body is not facing the direction I want it in."

"Zora, I'm waiting for eye contact right now."

"Zora, we're all over here. What are you doing?"

By the end of the day, I am tired. Mrs. Beverly is tired. Zora is tired. We're on the first step, intimidated by the long climb ahead.

One hundred and seventy-nine days to go.

### *Love Yourself*

"How do we want our classroom to be?" asks Mrs. Beverly. She is at her easel with marker in hand, the children gathered on the rug to begin the work of developing a set of shared rules for the year. "How do we want people to treat each other? How do we want the classroom environment to be when it's a work time? How do you want to feel when you walk in every morning? Those are the kinds of rules I want. This is *your* space, and for some of you it will be your space for two more years."

The children offer their thoughts. They're young but already well versed in the norms of classroom life and the words they know their teachers want to hear. The rules flow freely as the kids parrot what so many classroom rules sound like. *Keep the classroom green and clean. Respect other people. Respect the materials. Share. Treat people the way you want to be treated.* "Don't keep somebody lonely," offers one little girl. "Like, in a corner."

"How do we want to write that?" asks Mrs. Beverly, looking for raised hands.

Zora calls out. "Comfort somebody."

Mrs. Beverly ignores the contribution, with a look in Zora's direction that signals she should have raised her hand. She calls on another child, who says that if someone is lonely, you should ask

the person to play with you. Zora, who had been disengaged from the conversation until this idea of loneliness was raised, again calls out. She's eager on this point. "Comfort someone if they're alone. Maybe not if they're very upset. We should let them calm down a little first. But then comfort them."

It doesn't surprise me that this rule feels important to her. Zora lives a lonely life on the margins of her school community. She is different, caught in the intersections of identity. She's biracial, bicultural, and working toward becoming bilingual. And though her parents have money, they didn't come from money. She doesn't fit the rigid demographics of her class, which is overwhelmingly white, English only, and intergenerationally affluent.

While the other girls sit together, play together, and choose to work together, Zora is not included. She is bold, physical, active, exploding with a seemingly uncontrollable level of energy. She needs to move and is excited by rough-and-tumble play. She loves video games and action figures, loud sound effects and fierce pretend battles. This makes her better suited for the kind of play the young boys in her class engage in, and she often seeks them out despite the fact that her classmates tend to segregate themselves into single-sex playgroups. Zora challenges this norm.

Yet, she doesn't quite fit with the boys, either. Though her style of play suits them, her personality does not. Zora is authoritative and disregards the established social hierarchy that exists within the boys' group. She overrules the alpha males with her own wants and ideas, her own rules for how games should be played. She doesn't care that she lacks the unspoken social permission to be in charge of them, and she often tries to take control. This results in her exclusion from the boys' play as well.

For an observer, it hurts to witness her struggle for a place at the social center. At recess, I watch Zora try to enter an all-boys game of tag. The boy who is "it," a well-respected and popular child,

vigorously chases another revered male peer. Though a variety of boys are playing and many are much closer and easier to tag, this unnecessarily challenging pursuit continues.

Zora, rather than running away from the boy who is "it," runs toward him. *She* is chasing *him*. "Tag me!" she yells repeatedly. "Here I am! Get me!" Over and over she relentlessly repeats her command, which he systematically ignores despite the fact that she is easily within reach. It is painful to watch.

After a few futile minutes, she leaves the organized game and seeks out a comrade on the margins: a heavysset boy who is generally stuck playing with one of the paraprofessionals. He is an easy-going personality and loves to chase her even though she is super speedy and there is no chance of catching her. She dominates the play and he accepts her commands easily. As a result, they appear to enjoy a wonderful playtime together.

Yet, every day I watch her first try to enter the mainstream games without success. She doesn't seem to accept life on the margins, where she might create her own parallel play space with a hodgepodge of comrades. Rather, I watch her struggle futilely for a place at the dominant center. At lunch, in the cafeteria, she wanders around every day before landing inevitably at the last table, for all the kids who don't have a seat in the other circles. Hers is the only table mixed by race and gender. At choice time, while the other children immediately seek out the peers they play with each day, she doesn't have a place and often ends up alone after some kind of altercation resulting from an attempt to insert herself, uninvited, into another group's activity. When the children are allowed to choose their own work partners I see her body stiffen up, as she is likely anticipating the difficulty she will have finding someone with whom she can work.

Much of Zora's work time gets spent in attempts to entertain and amuse the other children. "Have you guys ever seen a moth close up? Like, *really* close up?" She is diligently working to distract the

others while they do scientific drawings of butterflies. "The first time I saw a moth's eyeballs close up, I screamed my pants off."

She looks around for the reaction.

Nothing.

So she repeats herself, but this time with dramatic flair: "I was like, ahhhhhhhh!" She pretends her pants are falling off while she struggles embarrassedly to keep them on. This gets the table going, and she appears to be feeling encouraged. "Hey, look, my drawing looks like this butterfly is singing and dancing on the flower!" She does a purposely silly, exaggerated jig. The kids crack up and she looks quite pleased with herself. Of course, now all the noise draws attention to the table and the teacher reprimands her. She is behind in her work and creating a deliberate distraction for the others. But she seems completely unaffected by getting in trouble, as though the opportunity to interact in a positive way with the other children was well worth the gamble of a negative consequence.

This strategy, of playing the role of entertainer in the classroom, is one Zora relies on quite a bit despite the fact that it so often results in trouble. She doesn't seem to have very many alternate strategies. Because she spends a lot of time alone, and because she is so often in trouble and then further excluded from the group for creating distractions, she doesn't get the opportunity to practice the social skills necessary for building and maintaining close relationships. "She nudges people relentlessly," says Mrs. Beverly. Being the group entertainer works well because she gets to be the center of attention *and* she gets to direct the scene onstage. But in close friendships, where there is a requirement for reciprocity, compromise, and give-and-take, she struggles to yield to other people's desires.

Zora has a thorny and complicated friendship with another child on the outskirts of social life in Room 1/2A—a boy named Tyler. These two are so often alone that coming together seems sensible, but their strong personalities in combination with their lack

of practice in social skills creates a volatile dynamic. I arrive at recess one day to find Zora screaming in Tyler's face. "I will *never*—I repeat, never, ever, ever—play with you again! You are the worst. Do you hear me? Never! Don't. Ever. Come. Near. Me. Again!" I had never seen her so angry before, and never saw her so angry again. It was a deep-down anger, the kind that comes from a deep-down pain. She stormed away, still muttering to herself, and was unreachable.

When I asked Tyler what had happened, he shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea. Who knows with her?"

Mrs. Beverly describes their relationship as one with a "push-pull" dynamic, one in which they need each other and are drawn together, but also one full of "nudging" and competition for authority. Tyler is the only child whom I ever heard Zora call a friend. At the end of both first and second grade, the children are asked to write reflective letters to themselves to include in their portfolios, summarizing the key moments and memories of the year that has passed. Zora includes Tyler in her short letters to self, in both first and second grade:

Dear Zora,

When you were in first grade you loved Greek study. Because you were very musicale. And you loved your teacher alot. Because your teacher taught you alot of lesons. And you love playing with your pal Tyler at reecs.

Love, Zora

At first she wrote that she "loved" playing with Tyler at recess, but then she scribbled out the "d" to make it present tense.

Dear Zora,

When you were in second grade you played with your Best pal Tyler. You played with him a lot. Evrey day you met up at the

play strucsher and played. You also had a favorite speshalest called gym. You liked it because it could get you fit and healthy. You also had a big event. You met with your pen pals, you played on the strucsher with them, you even saw a spider on the strucsher and you even said Hi to it. And you thought it was haveing fun. Oh, there were lots of things you did, but its getting to the end of the year. So your self just wanted to remind you of all of the things you did before the end of the year.

Sicerly, Zora Williams, from 1-2A

As Zora reflects on the most important aspects of her year, this special friend—whom I saw her fight with more often than not—receives attention and mention. The friendship is obviously important to her. She seems to sense their alignment intuitively, their shared position on the margins. At the same time, the relationship is a problematic one that leaves both without positive peer modeling of the skills required for friendship.

When asked to photograph a few of her favorite things, Zora captures an image of a toy that she explains is very important to her—a plush little remote control dog that can move and behave in other quite human ways. “I love him,” she explains. “Because he is always ready to play and he does what I want.” Even when I am with her at home and ready to play, she chooses the dog’s company over mine.

Living on the margins while refusing to embrace social norms leaves Zora without peer friendships or a genuine space of belonging. It must be lonely. While the other children are integrated into the fabric of classroom social life, hers is a loose and isolated thread. I often wonder if her disruptive behavior signals a desire to be seen, recognized, made central. Though her skin color makes her highly visible, classroom social life carries on as if she’s not there. It seems that the more she feels left out and invisible, the more she engages in behavior that actively draws the attention of others.



She is most often in trouble for the kinds of things that signal a desire to be noticed: calling out, being silly at the wrong times, failing to complete work because she has created entertaining distractions. "Even when she's calling something out," explains Mrs. Beverly, "it's not something that's a non sequitur. It's usually something that's kind of a smart-alecky remark but would make people laugh. And so she has kids enjoying her at the same time where I might be, like, you need to raise your hand."

As entertaining as she can be, the trouble she gets in signals to her peers that she is a problem. "She has a reputation as public enemy number one," Mrs. Beverly tells me. The reputation harms her relationships with both adults and children and stems from her earliest days at the school. During her kindergarten year, Zora struggled so severely that her parents tell me they considered removing her from school altogether. She regularly refused to comply with the mandates of the classroom—calling out and speaking out of turn, failing to complete assigned work, getting out of her seat to wander toward others, engaging in altercations and arguments with her classmates, actively and passively refusing to follow directions.

Her exasperated kindergarten teacher requested a paraprofessional to shadow Zora throughout the day. In this way, her behavior won her at least the full-time attention of one adult. She spent a significant amount of instructional time wandering the hallways with the paraprofessional on time-outs. The individualized attention and time away from class may have been emotionally preferable to the demands of classroom life. But she missed key and formative academic content, and the other children—looking on—internalized a harsh judgment of her.

When Zora entered first grade with Mrs. Beverly, the memory of kindergarten lay heavy in the air—and Mrs. Beverly was determined to improve Zora's behavior while refusing to physically exclude her. "I spent all summer thinking about how I was going to keep this kid in the room," she says. But keeping her in the

classroom did not mean she was included. Because her transgressions and the resulting redirection were often loud and public, daily and ongoing, her reputation as public enemy—in the eyes of her peers, especially—went unchallenged. This made social life more difficult and threatened Zora's ability to love herself. Though she was no longer physically removed from the classroom, she remained on the social outskirts.

As if to forge her own identity as a likable member of the classroom community, on her own terms, Zora regularly leveraged disruption as a way to entertain her peers. When children laughed at her jokes and her theater, she felt liked by them and, in turn, liked herself. For Zora, these feelings appeared to be worth the trouble.

### *Express Yourself*

The children are working on decorating one of their subject folders for the year. Mrs. Beverly has provided piles upon piles of animal photos cut from magazines. The children are to select from these and create collages on their folders, and as I scan the room the majority of children have dutifully followed the directions. Many are finished with the task before Zora has begun.

Zora picks up a picture of a seagull. She utters a series of very realistic-sounding seagull squawks while launching the photo into the air as though the bird has taken flight. It lands on her classmate's head. "Oops," she says, with a sly grin and a cartoonish bird voice. "It made an unpleasant deposit on your shoulder."

I hold back my laughter, and the child's displeased reaction draws Mrs. Beverly's attention. "Get to work, Zora. Or you'll be finishing during recess." The threat is motivating, and Zora sets about the task with more seriousness. Still, her work time includes many interludes during which animals battle one another, move together, talk trash, even give birth. The straightforward and constrained task is injected with her imagination, creativity, and dramatic flair.

Most of the children select a favorite animal and glue it in the center. Some overachievers make sensible additions of other animal friends that might be found with this central favorite. Zora, scanning both sides of each provided cutout, manages to locate a non-animal option: a large bust of some historical male royalty in costume. She immediately glues him to the folder. With purpose and clear intention now, she flips through the piles, locating any and all small birds. This requires that she move from table to table rather than stay seated, and she is again reprimanded. But the redirection does not deter her from her mission; she persists in collecting small birds anywhere she can find them, to the dismay of her classmates, who are often fishing through the pile when she grabs a picture from their stack. Sometimes she grabs an image right out of their hands.

In the end, her folder features an eccentric collection of small birds perched on the shoulders of royalty. Her work stands out. It is *out-standing*.

On another occasion the children are asked to border their name tags with a pattern. She begins immediately and, again, with purpose. Thunderbolt, heart, thunderbolt, heart, thunderbolt, heart. "Why thunderbolts?" I ask, considering it an unusual choice.

"For Zeus," replies Zora. "That's his symbol. And the hearts are for Aphrodite, the goddess of love." Her pattern stands out as she applies what she learned in Greek study the year before. She simply cannot help but bring brilliance and flair, even to mundane assignments.

A visit to Zora's home makes clear some of the roots of that flair. Her house sits at the end of a long driveway, so far back that it isn't immediately visible from the street. But once you see it, you can't miss it. It stands out.

A fenced gate at the side of the house is painted in multiple colors, each post different from the next. A careful design is painted

around the gate itself, an elaborate icon designed out of the first initial of each family member's name. I am greeted at the door by Zora's Puerto Rican grandmother from New York City—a lively, loud, exuberant force in a patterned sundress, tight curls, and wide smile. She is chatting me up excitedly, proudly introducing the features of the home. The television is on. A teenage uncle and brother are in the house someplace. A large dog in some kind of neck brace is getting at me. The other grandmother is coming to town. The mom is urging Zora to avoid distraction and finish her lunch. Shoes crowd the entryway and a sign at the door instructs visitors to use the hand sanitizer provided.

There is a lot to take in.

No inch of wall has been spared from the life of this family: words painted, photographs framed, artwork hanging. A giant, beautifully painted portrait of the mother and father on their wedding day—barefoot at the beach with the husband's arms around the wife's waist—is prominently featured. The mother, an artist, has been busy in this house. The stairs are painted. The doorknobs are painted. The dining table is hand carved and painted.

To enter Zora's room is to feel as if you are entering the scene of a beautifully chaotic fairy tale. An angled ceiling is painted yellow, accented busily with decals of planets and stars. The other walls are a bright coral, also featuring stickers and pictures and other décor. Glittery purple lace is draped from one side of the room to the other. A canopy bed with a printed quilt sits atop a bright, patterned area rug. One entire side of the room is filled with gigantic bins of toys and stuffed animals, and a comfy pink reading chair sits in the corner under a tall lamp, shaded by three oversized silk flowers. Objects around the room are labeled in both English and Spanish.

The door to Zora's room is painted coral, with a turquoise and yellow square in the center. A wreath hangs with pink and purple

flowers. Below that, a poster is featured with a quote paraphrased from Karl Marx: *Philosophers have sought to understand the world. The point, however, was to change it.*

Pictures of and quotes by prominent African American heroines and heroes hang above Zora's desk—a reminder of those who came before as she sets about her own work. A thank-you note from Mrs. Beverly is pinned to a corkboard, acknowledging a holiday gift from the family: *The bright and lovely colors remind me of you.*

And alongside the card are some words to Zora from her mother: *You are beautiful just the way you are.*

The home is wonderfully chaotic: busy, active, hectic, lived-in, alive. It is the very opposite of mundane. These are not people trying to fit in.

But in her school life, Zora is encouraged to conform. "She already stands out as one of a small handful of African American faces here," Mrs. Beverly tells me. "I don't want her behavior to make her stand out even more." There is value in going unnoticed at school. Belonging is synonymous with blending in. "We work really hard across these two classrooms to make every child feel accepted, part of this community. And we work—Jane and I work really hard on behavior." To the teachers, working hard on behavior is working hard on making the children acceptable so they can be accepted. At home, though, Zora is encouraged to follow her own path, to be *out-standing*, to express herself, and to be proud of being different.

Zora's parents model standing out, and having pride in being different, as a strategic response to hostile and isolating environments. Zora's mom regularly attends school events, and I always notice how she stands out. The other moms are overwhelmingly white and are in careful and subdued outfits with simple hairstyles and laid-back looks. Mrs. Williams, in her turquoise capris and hot pink T-shirt, or her brightly patterned sundresses, or her body-fitting long red skirt, dons large earrings, painted nails, reddish

curls in a high ponytail puff. She often sits or stands apart from the other parents.

I wonder if Zora's mom misses her old neighborhood in New York, where folks of color were the norm rather than the exception. When I ask if she ever feels lonely or isolated in her now predominantly white community, she smiles. "Nah," she says. "I notice how people around here sometimes look at me. It's like the way those girls in Zora's class look at her. With their noses up. But when I feel like they're judging me, looking at me like that, I just turn everything up a notch—I blast my music, turn up the heat on my accent, you know . . ." She laughs. "I'm like, here I am. Let me just put *all* this out there."

Her husband, too, can't be missed. He comes to a poetry reading by the children in a bright yellow corduroy blazer, lavender dress shirt, and a plaid, pastel-colored bow tie. Polka-dots on his socks. A spoken-word artist himself, he cheers all the children on loudly, proudly, calling out during their poems as is customary among artists in shared spaces—while the other parents clap politely and in measured time at each poem's end. In this context, and by his standards, calling out is not only appropriate, but required.

Rather than conform, these two leverage the act of being *out-standing* as a response to hostility, fully embracing a life and an identity at the margins. Coming of age in spaces where people of color were the majority, they enjoyed a sense of belonging in their formative years that ultimately bolstered the development of their strong, proud, and lively personalities. While her mom exaggerates her accent, and her dad dons his exceptionally bright clothing, they model an example of standing tall while standing out. It is as if to say, *We know you see us, so we'll give you something to look at.* It is a strategy they wish to pass along to Zora. *Stand tall. Express yourself. Love yourself.* For Zora, though, who is working hard to fit into an all-white space, being *out-standing* is punishable and ultimately isolating. Actively drawing attention

to herself, refusing to conform or comply, is unwelcome behavior that strays from the norm.

Importantly, and to make matters more complicated, that norm reflects particular ways of being that will prepare the children at Zora's school for their assumed futures in white-dominated, affluent professions. There are particular ways to speak, to write, to interact with others. There are coveted skills and prized discourses, valued types of knowledge and celebrated modes of being. There is a culture to the classroom space. Mrs. Beverly and Mrs. Norbert often refer to this simply as "school culture," a neutral, normalized, and nonracialized term. But the presence of only a handful of children of color, who are more often in trouble than their white peers, prompts questions about the role of race. The very existence of these children forces the teachers to consider the possibility of racial factors, to be made aware of and self-conscious about their own whiteness.

Mrs. Beverly often worries aloud about whether her constant redirection is an attempt to make Zora "more white." She worries that the all-white space of the school encourages kids of color to get culturally "watered down": "Do I feel like 'White Teacher' sometimes? Yes. I feel it. I feel that I work in white suburbia. Our history with African Americans is such a dark one in so many ways. But I don't think Zora's parents would be happy for her to be at a charter, or some inner-city school that wasn't a high-flying one. So where do you find a school where there's more black culture, where it's black kids acting like black kids—not acting like the watered-down image of a white kid? And I do—those things do keep me up at night. And it's not just about Zora; it's about other kids of color that I've had. I think of all our kids of color here. Unfortunately, percentage-wise, more of them have behavior issues. And I don't know why that is."

Mrs. Beverly wrestles with the question of whether her strict

enforcement of a particular way of being is racialized, going so far as to note the pattern at the school level in which kids of color are disproportionately in trouble. But she persists in that strict enforcement because she believes the demands of school life in grade three and beyond will require ever-increasing conformity to these behavioral expectations—the expectations of an overwhelmingly white, mainstream majority. Understanding that there are academic and economic rewards for meeting a standard of white, middle-class conformity, she cites those rewards as part of the motivation for enforcing a strict norm of behavior.

Her intentions are to hold Zora to the same standard as everyone else, regardless of color, even as she struggles with a discomfort that keeps her up nights. She feels that in doing so, she is readying Zora for a college experience and professional life that will likely demand the kinds of cultural behaviors and skills valued by the school. Her principled intentions, coupled with the troubling picture she paints of the “watered-down image of a white kid,” remind me of Carter G. Woodson’s words in the *Mis-Education of the Negro*:

When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized White man. . . . In this effort to imitate, however, these “educated people” are sincere. They hope to make the Negro conform quickly to the standard of the Whites and thus remove the pretext for the barriers between the races. They do not realize, however, that even if the Negroes do successfully imitate the Whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. The unusual gifts of the race have not thereby been developed, and an unwilling world, therefore, continues to wonder what the Negro is good for.<sup>9</sup>



I wonder how and where Zora's unusual gifts will get developed—the cultural gifts passed down from her African and Puerto Rican ancestors of color as well as those unique to her as an individual: fierce creativity, a flair for the dramatic, uncontainable energy.

I also wonder how the other children, part of the “unwilling world,” will come to understand and appreciate Zora. Mrs. Beverly expresses this worry as another motivation for coming down hard on Zora's behavior. She worries that the other children—having so few experiences with people of color—will form an association in their minds between skin color and behavior: “Zora is African American, and from absolutely proud parents who want her to be totally intact as a person. And I just wonder what this would all look like if Zora were in a different school where there was not so much white-bread Americana. There have been times where I've felt a little frustrated, I mean, it's not that I wouldn't call Zora out on everything if her skin color were different. I'd be calling her on it anyway. That's just who I am as a teacher. But there's times when I am like, this is my one African American child who has heard me say her name fifteen times—and what judgments are the kids around her making? That's something that I've actually spoken to her parents about. I've said, look, she's one of our few kids of color in the entire school. You couple that with behavior that she's really not quite able to manage, and that's where the heads are swiveling. That's where kids are making assessments of their own.”

Indeed, as I witness Zora's lonely life at school, I wonder how these assessments prevent her from carving out a genuine space of belonging. Her differentness is cause for isolation, even as her parents encourage and celebrate their own differentness.

I wonder how a seven-year-old is to make sense of these simultaneous and conflicting messages. At home she is encouraged to be out-standing and to embrace a life on the margins. Difference is celebrated as a resource and a source of pride. At school she is encouraged to avoid drawing attention to herself, to find belonging in

the center of mainstream conformity. Difference is deviance, and deviance is punishable. Balancing the need to fit in with the reality of standing out is hard and taxing work. It is a burden Zora carries to school each day, a parallel and covert kind of teaching and learning she has to navigate. Her white peers do not share that burden and do not experience that same distraction to their academic learning. As Mrs. Beverly wonders aloud about the academic and social patterns that develop in the kids of color at Forest School, I think about this extra burden some children are forced to carry.

### *Be Fearless*

"You know you're going to get in trouble if you get caught going that way, right?" We are on a nature walk through the forest surrounding the school, and Zora is taking a forbidden route around a fallen tree. The kids have been strictly warned, and she is falling behind the group significantly. I am feeling anxious, so I remind her that she is doing the wrong thing. She ignores me. I repeat myself. "Zora, you were told that you are not allowed to go that way." She ignores me again. The way of the fallen tree is so much more fun. It's slightly more treacherous and requires some jumping and problem solving. The path is not clear or easy, and in keeping with Zora's usual preference, adventure trumps the mundane. She trudges on. All the other children and adults are now completely out of sight, way ahead of us. When she clears the tree, I ask again, "You don't care about getting in trouble?"

"Don't worry so much," she replies. "You worry too much." And she takes off in a sprint to catch up with the rest of the group. Mrs. Beverly, who rarely misses a beat, sees her late arrival and begins to lay in. "We have all been gathered here for some time now, Zora. Do you want to explain why you have arrived so late? Did you imagine I wouldn't notice?" The scolding is loud, public, and severe. Zora sulks.

On the walk back to school Zora seems to pass the scolding forward, reprimanding other children for all kinds of transgressions. *You're too close to the street. Walk faster. Don't stop to pick things up; we're in a hurry. Tie your shoelace.* She mirrors the kind of authority modeled by the teacher, attempting to gain back some of the power she lost during her public reprimand. In the absence of reciprocal and equal relationships with her peers, she opts for one of assumed authority, and I often see that authoritative stance ramp up just after receiving a scolding. "She's one of the class bosses," another child tells me at lunch, with a tone of dislike.

"Is that true?" I ask Zora.

"Well, I prefer to think of myself as a junior assistant."

Zora is bold in pursuing her own desires—audacious at times—and doing so often requires that she wrestle with and negotiate not only the teacher's power over her, but also the power of her peers. "I'm waiting for a quiet table," Mrs. Beverly announces when the children are about to start decorating their writing folders. "The quietest table will be called up first to get their materials." Each group has a "head of table," and Zora's assigned leader is a white boy named Aidan. He takes his job very seriously. Zora is talking—telling a story to entertain her group—when she is supposed to be silent. Aidan puts the two-finger quiet signal directly in her face. I am struck by this white boy's audacity, and the raced and gendered undertones of the interaction. Infuriated, Zora loudly scolds him. They are both very frustrated with each other, and they glare at each other with angry eyes.

Zora then becomes fixated on the idea that a folder she has in her backpack could be her writing folder, instead of the one she is about to decorate. Her group still has not been called for supplies, thanks to the hullabaloo between her and Aidan. She begins to get up from the table to retrieve the folder from her backpack in the hallway, which is strictly forbidden for several reasons. She

shouldn't be getting up at all since her entire group is still waiting to be called. Leaving the classroom right now will not be a good choice. "Zora!" Aidan looks like he is about to blow a gasket. She ignores him.

"What is it, Zora?!" Mrs. Beverly now shares Aidan's frustration.

"I have an *Angry Birds* folder in my backpack. That could be my writing folder."

"Do you think this is helping your group get called? I see Aidan, as your head of house, looking very frustrated! Get back to your seat."

When Zora returns to her spot, Aidan opens his mouth to say something. She puts her hand directly over his mouth: "Don't. Talk. To. Me. At. All," says Zora. She then puts her hands over her own face, as a way to disappear for a moment. Now, from the front of the classroom and across the entire space so as to be public, Mrs. Beverly continues her reprimand.

"Is your *Angry Birds* folder your writing folder, Zora?" It's a hypothetical question to which the answer should be "no."

"It *can* be," says Zora, challenging.

Mrs. Beverly is getting angrier. "But is it?"

"No."

"So did you really need to delay your whole group, and then get up to tell me about it?" Before Zora can answer she continues: "This is one of the things you're working on. Thinking to yourself, 'Do I need to do this?'" Zora's eyes get glassy. Aidan is at peace. It feels to me that Zora *did* need to get up to ask about that folder. Another child would not need to, perhaps, but her desire to retrieve that folder—to have it be her writing folder—felt urgent. Aidan's attempt to control her made that desire all the more pressing. And she tests Mrs. Beverly's power by trying to momentarily reason with her—"It *can* be." Ultimately, she is shut down by the teacher's power over her. And the entire event reinforces Aidan's power because he receives confirmation of his authority from the teacher, even though he failed to control Zora.

These incidents usually end badly for Zora, since neither Mrs. Beverly nor her peers miss any opportunity to reprimand and redirect her. Still, Zora fearlessly persists in pursuing her own desires, regardless of the predictable consequences. When she has a question, she blurts it out. Never mind the rule to raise hands or wait until questions are invited. When there is a butterfly outside the window, she gets up to look at it. Never mind that the teacher is in the middle of a whole-class lesson and Zora has chosen to leave the lesson without permission to catch a glimpse of it. When Zora wants to express a reaction to a read-aloud, she dramatically and loudly announces it. Never mind that she interrupts the reading and distracts the other twenty students with her expression.

Rules do not seem to impact Zora's decision-making process. Mrs. Beverly calls this "impulsive" and characterizes it as a lack of self-control. But it feels more to me like fearlessness. I think Zora considers the consequences and weighs the options, and then fearlessly decides to do what she wants anyway. As when she chose the dangerous and forbidden path on the nature walk, she refuses to "worry too much" about consequences.

At lunch one day, she is building what she excitedly calls a "super straw." Having grabbed more than ten straws from the cafeteria supply stack, she is connecting one to the next in a long string and she is planning on launching a spitball. The other children at the table are very interested, and this makes Zora all the more committed to her project. The paraprofessionals working the lunchroom, accustomed as they are to reprimanding her, are never too far away. "Zora, the rule is one straw. You know that because I've told you many times before." The paraprofessional begins to grab the pile of extra, unopened straws. Zora puts her hand on top of the adult's, to stop her.

"Please! I'm working on something! Please leave these alone! Walk away." Fearlessness.

"You know the rule," the adult patiently repeats, and she leaves with the tools for Zora's unfinished creation. I expect Zora to become upset, but instead she smiles slyly.

"Uh-huh!" she announces proudly, and pulls out a bunch of straws she was hiding under her leg on the chair. "She didn't see *these!*" And construction of the super straw commences. She doesn't seem at all fearful of getting caught. Indeed, I don't see her look up even once to check on the location of the adults. Her own project is paramount.

At just seven years old, Zora is already hypervisible and closely watched. The cafeteria paraprofessionals swarm around her, the recess ladies always have one eye keenly fixed on her, Mrs. Beverly always has her name in her mouth. She already stands out. She already has to negotiate the power exercised over her by others—adults and children alike.

Zora necessarily stands apart from her peers, and standing apart creates the possibility of standing below or above them. Though Mrs. Beverly is the clear authority, her reprimands serve as a model to the children for how to regulate the behavior of their peers. The children in Room 1/2A very often scold, redirect, and regulate one another, and they receive mixed messages about whether or not this is acceptable. On the one hand they are told only to "police yourself" and are sometimes reprimanded for bossing one another. On the other hand they are also told to "help each other do the right thing" and assigned positions of authority like "head of table," which become implicit and explicit encouragements to police one another.

When a peer wanders over to Zora's group during stations, Zora doesn't miss a beat: "Get back to work, Megan. You know where you're supposed to be." When she sees an aimless kindergartner in the hallway: "You shouldn't be out of class. Get back!" On another occasion, Zora scolds another child for sucking on her hair, and a

commotion ensues during a lesson. The teacher says, "Police yourself," sternly, to Zora. But then she follows with a reprimand to the other girl. "But don't suck your hair. It will give you tangles." Zora has a look of satisfaction and redemption, which she passes to the other child in a gaze that silently says, *Told you so*.

Though Zora dishes out a good deal of peer scolding, she receives more of it than I can possibly capture. The children are often on her, mirroring the very language teachers use to redirect her. Zora is policed by her peers more than any other child in either of the two classes. During a single school day I recorded sixteen separate instances. In this way, she seems to stand below her peers. They feel they have the right, if not the duty, to exercise authority and power over her.

But Zora does not take these attempts at subjugation lightly. For every attempt to exercise power over her, there is an equal and reciprocal attempt to exercise her power over others. It is well established that she is fearless and authoritative. When pen pals from another school come to visit for the first time, it takes Zora's pen pal no more than ten minutes of interaction to conclude, "Sheesh, you are bossy!" It feels to me like a preemptive strike of some kind—the immediate desire to exercise power over, perhaps borne of the consistent disempowerment she experiences at the hands of both adults and her peers. She aligns herself with the role of a teacher, an authority, the "junior assistant."

This officious role, much like the entertainer role she often plays, can be seen as power and recognition. It is a way to be seen and to make herself visible that she controls and exercises at her own will; it is a counterattack, a response to the negative visibility that has been assigned to her and is beyond her control. These may not be positive ways to be seen, but at least they are identities she perceives to be choosing for herself.

*Have Fun*

Like all children, Zora wants an opportunity to enjoy the experience of school—to play, to be celebrated, to thrive, to belong. She wants to have fun. And she often feels that teachers stand in the way of that fun. When she takes to using jump ropes on the playground structure in a dangerous way, pretending they are horsewhips, she is reprimanded by the supervising teachers. “I’ll never have my horses,” she mutters to herself repeatedly. “Not with all these teachers around.” To an adult, especially one tasked with keeping children within the bounds of reason and safety, her defiance can make her unlikable.

Mrs. Beverly is on point when she talks about the teacher she would like Zora to have in third grade, a teacher who is capable of seeing Zora’s goodness: “Well, I think, here is a child who is loud, who is impulsive, who is a distraction to others. You’ve got to be able to like that kid. And if you can’t like that kid from day one, she’s not gonna feel that you like her or accept her in the room. And that sends a message to everyone else. As hard as I am on Zora, everyone knows that I like her. It’s clear. It’s even clear to her, and I think I’m harder on her than anyone. So, she needs someone who on day one is going to make her feel, *You are part of this classroom. I’m gonna stand by you. I am gonna scold you or I’m gonna guide you, but it’s for your good. It’s not because I don’t like you.* And I think that, luckily, Zora is a likable kid. She is bright and funny and entertaining, but there are times where you want to strangle her because she is doing something that’s absolutely not acceptable and taking six kids with her down that path.”

Despite the obvious frustration that accompanies a difficult-to-manage child like Zora, Mrs. Beverly insists on the teacher’s responsibility to stand by the child, to insist on her full participation, to like her. Still, though, and ironically, accepting the child means



forcing the child into a particular definition of acceptable. To fully participate in the classroom community, to belong, Zora needs to be a point on the normal bell curve of behavior—not an outlier: “In a mixed-grade classroom, that behavior doesn’t look so different because you get little kids in here who are still working on things. But in the third-grade classroom, it’s gonna show more. In a straight-grade classroom, that spectrum of learning isn’t as long as mine is. Straight-grade teachers are not as used to working on outliers, and Zora is an outlier in several places. She’s made a lot of gains, but she’s still an outlier, just in terms of habits of mind for school.”

Some teachers work hard to manage children’s behavior because they worry about how poor management will reflect on them as teachers. It is a self-interested motivation. For Mrs. Beverly, a veteran teacher with much experience and confidence, this is not at all the case. She has Zora’s best interests at heart, even as she struggles with whether or not her constant redirection is problematic. “I see it as a quality-of-life issue,” she says. “It must be exhausting to be so distracted and extreme, to have several movies always going on in your head at once.”

Mrs. Beverly wants for Zora not to be an outlier. She wants her to be more normal, conforming, and compliant, so she can fit in and belong as a full, positive member of the classroom community. As a result, with the support of both Mrs. Norbert and the school psychologist, the issue of medication was raised to Zora’s parents. Zora’s impulsivity, her uncontainable energy, her insistence on adding flair to the mundane, is understood by the school as evidence of the possibility of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I was present in a meeting where Zora’s mother faced both of the teachers and the psychologist as they made their case for medication. The conversation focused on the “quality of life” Zora could enjoy if she were able to calm down a bit, fit in. They raised worry about her social skills. They raised worry about her math skills. They spoke of “impulsive” behaviors, with a multitude of examples,

and they talked about children they had known for whom medication made a significant and positive difference.

Zora's mom couldn't deny the behaviors—the high energy, the feistiness, the creativity and dramatic flair that often distracted Zora from serious, hurried, or required tasks. “Yes, I have to remind her so many times to finish her breakfast or to get dressed. I know she's that way.”

Against the backdrop of three school personnel presenting the evidence, making the case, it felt like persuasion more than discussion. Eventually, and with extreme hesitation, Zora's parents did start her on medication for ADHD. There were problems with the first attempt—weight loss and a dwindling appetite, a quiet and too-subdued Zora. Mrs. Beverly expressed her worry: “I don't want to lose the piece of Zora that is who she is, like her sense of humor, her kind of sassiness. I don't really want that to go away. And I have much sympathy and empathy for her parents. I know they want her off the meds. I know they totally want her off the meds. But off the meds, she does look super young and super out of control.”

She was switched to an alternative medication.

When I asked Zora's parents about the medication over breakfast one morning, they talked about the struggle they faced in making the decision. Tears welled up in her mom's eyes. “I just—when it started to feel like she was falling behind, we got really worried.”

As the medication calms her and she increasingly learns to fit the school norm as the years go by, I lament the potential loss of fun. What if things get dreary? Mundane tasks will retain their mundaneness. There will be no pretend animal battles, no silly jigs, no hilariously inappropriate jokes, no entertaining distractions and comic interludes. There will be no flair, dramatic or otherwise. She will trade adventurous and dangerous tree jumping in favor of a clear and easy path forward. Maybe she won't wear her father's bright colors. Maybe she won't splash her mother's artistic creativity on the walls of her own future home.

Maybe she will make good, predominantly white friends and finally find a desired place at the social center of her school. Maybe she will thrive academically without distractions. Maybe she will go on to fit easily into a college and professional life coded with particular cultural standards for behavior. Maybe things will be easier, less painful.

But will she have fun? Will she remain fearless? Will she be able to love and express herself—in full and without hesitation? Will she be free?

Back at the start of the school year the conversation about class rules is wrapping up, the list coming to a close. Mrs. Beverly puts the cap back on her marker. "Wait!" Zora exclaims, without raising her hand, speaking out of turn. "We forgot another rule."

I'm surprised to see that Mrs. Beverly responds to her calling out. "What is it?" she asks, opening her marker back up.

"Have fun."

That important rule is on one of the highest stairs in Zora's home. Mrs. Beverly adds it.

"Put a heart and a star next to that one," says Zora, smiling.

#### *Coda: How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*

Zora goes her own way. Animated, active, and nonconforming, she is fearlessly willing to risk punishment in exchange for small moments of fun and social connection. She leveraged disruption, performance, and other strategies of attention-getting to create lively touches of entertainment and dramatic interludes throughout the school day. She shined the spotlight on herself during these brief stints on the classroom's center stage, making herself seen and heard. Already racially spotlighted as the only child of color in the class, Zora owned every opportunity to stand out and perform on her own terms.

Her efforts to be hypervisible, though, resulted in the teachers' equal efforts to make her invisible—to redirect, scold, and train her into fitting in more easily with the others. This response from the school meant she was constantly in trouble. Despite her efforts to deliver a funny and entertaining performance, she was most often cast in the part of troublemaker, assigned to play the role of problematic child of color. In this way, Zora succeeded in being seen, but she was seen as bad. And, importantly, the other young children were an attentive audience, daily receiving the message that being different is a problem, and drawing racial associations.

The consequences Zora bore reminded the other children to attentively toe the line, to blend in rather than stand out. The classroom expectation of assimilation to a prescribed norm was not particular to Zora; it was a value held strongly by the teachers, as Mrs. Norbert and Mrs. Beverly repeatedly used language of wanting the children "not to stand out." When I questioned them about their repeated redirections to Carmen, the anxious child who had a habit of opening her mouth and holding her arms a particular way when speaking publicly, Mrs. Beverly said, "You can't have a person who stands like this with their mouth gaping open." She went on: "She has enough trouble making friends. That's not helping. That's making you stand out in a way, and you have to think down the road about the consequences of standing out like that."

Mrs. Norbert piggybacked: "We talk to them about that. We say, 'Look, if you don't want to stand out, sometimes you have to look more like everyone else. Opening your mouth and sticking your hands out like this, is that going to make you look more like everyone else, or very different?'"

Mrs. Beverly continued: "We had to tell her, 'Right now you're doing these behaviors, especially when you're nervous. But we're going to change those behaviors, because they make you stand out.' You have to try to make them see that they have some choices to make, about how they're going to look to the rest of the world."

This talk of not standing out, not looking different, is strong, consistent, and explicit in the work these teachers do with all their students. They tell the children that making friends, that being seen in a positive way by the "rest of the world," requires that you fit in, not stand out, to be and look and behave like "everyone else."

For Zora, though, this standard was especially difficult and problematic; it was literally impossible for her to look like everyone else. Mrs. Beverly acknowledges the reality of working in a white-bread school, noting that if Zora attended a school populated by more children of color maybe she wouldn't stand out so much. "She wouldn't hear her name as often," she admitted. "She just wouldn't."

But even despite this recognition that context matters, the fact was that Zora was attending *this* school, and there was a certain way to be like everyone else in *this* school. The dominant population—in this case, an overwhelmingly white and affluent one—dictated the norms and standards.

Zora was seeking a sense of belonging, a place of social acceptance and affirmation in her community of peers. Her strategy was to leverage the antics of noncompliance, to stand out, to make herself seen. The teachers wanted Zora to be accepted by her peers, too, but their sense of how children come to belong was in direct conflict with Zora's. Conflating conformity with belonging meant they pushed their continuous desire for acculturation to the mainstream.

Because the teachers believed Zora should change to be more like the majority community, their punitive response to standing out tended to push Zora further to the outskirts of this community. She became a troublemaker in the eyes of her peers, who routinely bore witness to her public reprimands and who were routinely allowed to participate in policing her. The teachers' efforts to make her more acceptable in fact rendered her more and more different—a problematic and troublesome other.

I think of the question W.E.B. DuBois raised more than a century ago: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Of his own boyhood attending school with white children, of his own developing consciousness of difference, he writes, "It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil." In the staging of his own difference as a black child in an unwelcoming white space, he speaks of the "double-consciousness" that develops, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>10</sup> While Zora performs her dramatic antics, shining the spotlight of hypervisibility on herself, I wonder how she is coming to see herself through the eyes of her audience, a community of peers who find her simultaneously entertaining and troublesome.

Can Zora love herself through such a gaze?

Whether she is controlled socially through constant redirection or internally through medication, or both, the insistence on making Zora more compliant—more like the others—was required for her success. I worry about her capacity to remain out-standing in light of the persistent demand for sameness.