

# When Dasani Left Home

What happens when trying to escape poverty means separating from your family at 13?



By Andrea Elliott Photographs by Ruth Fremson

Sept. 28, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

The city shrinks from view. Cars pass along the highway. Dasani Coates looks out the window, seeing trees and snowy banks, and then a sign:

Pennsylvania

Welcomes You

STATE OF INDEPENDENCE

All her life, she has been hearing about Pennsylvania. This is the place where people go to be free. Her mother, Chanel Sykes, went as a child, leaving Brooklyn on a bus for Pittsburgh to escape the influence of a crack-addicted parent. Now 13-year-old Dasani is going, but to a different place — a boarding school in rural Hershey that tries to rescue children from poverty.

“I want to attend the Milton Hershey school because I want to get a better education,” Dasani wrote in her application essay. She was eager to be “away from my family a little bit,” she added, “but at least I know I get to see them on the Holidays.”

None of Dasani’s seven siblings had ever left home. They had always stuck together, even when they were homeless, moving between New York City’s shelters with their parents, Chanel and her husband, Supreme. Then, in October 2014, they landed a rent-subsidized apartment on Staten Island’s North Shore, an area rattled by gang warfare and evictions. Three months later, on Jan. 26, 2015, Dasani was preparing to leave for the Hershey school.

“You know Sani leaving, right?” her mother told Baby Lee-Lee that morning. The toddler pushed her tiny nose into Dasani’s face, mumbling “No, no, no, no.” Then she poked Dasani in the eye with a piece of Bazooka bubble gum.

“She don’t understand,” Dasani whispered. “Yet.”

Even Dasani had yet to grasp what her departure would mean. She had spent her rocky childhood guarding the survival of her siblings, learning to change diapers before she was in kindergarten. She was her mother’s firstborn but acted more like a parent with her tight-knit flock of siblings, who spanned the ages of 2 to 12 — her “full blood” sister, Avianna, their four half siblings, Maya, Hada, Papa and Lee-Lee, and two stepsiblings, Khaliq and Nana.

“Family is everything,” Dasani told me. She did not know a world without them.

To avoid saying goodbye, she distracted Lee-Lee with the cartoon show “Peg + Cat,” slipping away before the toddler noticed. She carried no suitcase, only a stack of family photographs, a bottle of perfume and a small black purse filled with dozens of coins. Out on the stoop, standing in the snow, was Dasani’s stepfather, Supreme, a 37-year-old barber. He hugged Dasani hard, saying, “I love you,” which he never said. Then he watched her step away, his eyes wet.

“I’m mad jealous,” he said softly. “Wish I could do it all over again. I’d be so happy — I’d be so happy to go to school. To go to *school*.”

On the drive to Hershey, Dasani watches as Route 78 gives way to a country road, cutting through vast fields of corn. I am at the wheel, next to Chanel, who would soon turn 37. Dasani’s two oldest sisters, Avianna and Nana, have come along for the ride. They look out the car window, seeing farmhouses and silos pointing to the sky. Dasani squints at the horizon, finding nothing but hills. The cows make her shriek, the way that city rats might alarm a country child.

A look of marvel crosses Avianna’s face. Born only 11 months apart, she and Dasani consider themselves “twins.” Only they have names like their mother — Chanel — evoking fancy liquids that are bottled and sold. For years, they shared the same dresser and mattress, even the same pillow.

Neither sister could imagine saying goodbye. Three nights earlier, they were cleaning the kitchen when Beyoncé’s song “Listen” came on the speaker. Avianna’s face bunched up as Dasani and Chanel rushed to hold her. Together, they slow danced to the words.

I am alone at a crossroads  
I'm not at home in my own home ...  
I followed the voice you gave to me  
But now I've gotta find my own.



Dasani in 2013. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**I first met Dasani** in October 2012, when she was an 11-year-old homeless girl growing up in Fort Greene, Brooklyn — a neighborhood where the rich and the poor live within striking proximity. The following year, I published a five-part series about Dasani after spending 14 months with her family.

All 10 of them — Dasani, her parents, her seven siblings and her pet turtle — were living in a single mouse-infested room at Auburn Family Residence, a decrepit city-run homeless shelter just blocks from townhouses that sold for millions. Day after day, Dasani would walk through Fort Greene's streets, seeing into a world that did not see her. "I'm visible," she later told me. "But society doesn't see me."

She had a delicate oval face, chestnut skin and luminous brown eyes. Tiny for her age, Dasani woke early every morning to feed and dress her siblings before getting them to school. She was a dancer, a sprinter, a proud street fighter. There were three ways, in her mother's view, for a child to be popular: "Dress fly. Do good in school. Fight."

Some people balked at Dasani's fierce edge, but her middle-school principal, Paula Holmes, could see past it. She was the kind of girl, by Holmes's lights, who could become anything she wanted — even a Supreme Court justice — if she harnessed her gifts in time. "Dasani has something that hasn't even been unleashed yet," Holmes said. "It's still being cultivated."

Dasani's roots in Fort Greene reached back four generations, to her great-grandfather Wesley Sykes, who left North Carolina to fight in Italy with the Army's segregated all-Black regiment, the Buffalo Soldiers. After returning home in 1945 as a triple Bronze Service Star veteran, Sykes married and migrated north to Brooklyn, where it was nearly impossible for a Black family to get a mortgage. While the G.I. Bill lifted millions of white veterans into the middle class — helping them go to college, start businesses and become homeowners —

Black veterans were largely excluded. Sykes, who was trained in the Army as a mechanic, wound up mopping floors and pouring concrete in Brooklyn, working more than 30 low-wage jobs. He and his wife, Margaret, settled for a rent-subsidized apartment in Fort Greene Houses, the complex Dasani would come to know as “the projects.”

Sykes’s fifth child — Dasani’s grandmother Joanie Sykes — was born in the very building where Dasani would later live, after the public hospital at 39 Auburn Place became a homeless shelter. By 1978, Joanie was pregnant with Chanel, naming her for the perfume she spotted in a glossy magazine.

Chanel’s childhood dovetailed with a new era of urban crisis. As the crack epidemic surged, her mother became addicted and sent Chanel, as a baby, to live with her father and his common-law wife, Sherry. Chanel was 2 when her father fell to his death at a construction site. She remained with Sherry, a stable, churchgoing businesswoman, while spending weekends with Joanie, who relied on welfare checks to support her habit. At age 8, Chanel found her mother’s crack pipe in a jewelry box.

“It was like two different people trying to raise one kid,” Chanel said. Sherry tried to weaken Joanie’s influence by sending Chanel, at age 10, to live in Pittsburgh with a relative and attend a Catholic school. But Chanel longed for her mother and was soon back in New York, living in a homeless shelter with Joanie. By her early 20s, Chanel had dropped out of high school, joined the Bloods gang and was hooked on crack — just as her mother turned her life around. Joanie had gotten sober and, through a welfare-to-work program, took a full-time job cleaning the A train.

Dasani was born in 2001, when Chanel was 23. She gave birth to Dasani’s sister, Avianna, the following year before parting ways with the man who fathered both girls. By 2005, Chanel had married Supreme, another Brooklyn native who had survived multiple traumas. Together they vowed to reform their lives, creating the kind of family they never had — a strong army of siblings with an unbreakable bond. “This is a cruel world,” Chanel told me. “I wanted them to rely on each other. So they don’t need to depend on people who aren’t family.”



Dasani (in cat shirt) with Supreme, Chanel and other siblings in Brooklyn in 2013. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Hovering over the family was the Administration for Children’s Services, the agency tasked with investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect. A.C.S. caseworkers had been monitoring Chanel and Supreme, off and on, since 2004. On 12 occasions, they found evidence of parental neglect because of a lack of supervision, educational lapses or parental drug use. In 2011, Chanel temporarily lost custody of the

children after leaving them at Auburn unattended. They remained in Supreme's care as both parents began drug-treatment programs, determined to keep their family intact. "We didn't have family," Chanel said. "That's why the street became our family. I didn't want the street to become their family, too."

It took months for Chanel to talk to me with such candor. Eventually, she said that if I wasn't a mother, she would never have let me near her children (most of whom are identified by their nicknames). It also helped that I was not, in her words, "all white" because I am "Latin" — my mother is an immigrant from Chile, a fact that delighted Dasani, whose biological father is half Dominican.

After The New York Times published the series about Dasani — with vivid photographs by Ruth Fremson — readers deluged the newspaper with calls and emails, offering donations to the family. We directed them to the Legal Aid Society, which had set up a trust for Dasani and her siblings. She was still on the front page when the incoming mayor, Bill de Blasio, held a news conference saying, "we can't let children of this city like Dasani down." His administration went on to remove more than 400 children from Auburn and another shelter, permanently closing both facilities to children.

For a blinding moment, Dasani felt like the city's most celebrated child. Cameras flashed as she took the stage at de Blasio's inauguration in January 2014. She held the Bible for the incoming public advocate, Letitia James, who called her "my new BFF."

But long after the attention waned, Dasani's family was still homeless, now living at a shelter in Harlem. Donors to the trust had expressed concern about money going to parents with a drug history. Even absent this issue, any cash donations would have counted as income, causing the family to lose its food stamps and other public assistance. Dasani came to understand that the trust was mostly for college — a fund for the future, not an exit ramp from poverty.

After the series ran, Dasani's family agreed to let me continue following their story for a book, — a project that would keep me in their lives for nearly a decade. By June 2014, Dasani was nearing the end of seventh grade, commuting by bus from Harlem to her school in Fort Greene. She had missed 52 days of school — nearly a third of the academic year. While chronic absenteeism is typical among homeless students, Holmes, the principal, also blamed Dasani's mother for burdening her oldest daughter with child care. This contributed, Holmes thought, to Dasani's aggressive behavior in school.

"She's short-fused," Holmes told me. "But her anger is really not at anybody here. Her anger is about this unnecessary baggage that's been imposed on this kid." In June 2014, Holmes hatched a plan. She called Dasani into her office to announce it: She would apply to the Hershey school. Leaving home, for this child, was the surest way to a better life.

Even as a little girl, Dasani brimmed with aspirations. She had a daily routine: She would wake before her siblings and sit by her window, staring at the Empire State Building in the glint of early morning. She said, "It makes me feel like there's something going on out there."

She had been reaching for that something all her life. "I have a lot of possibility," she told me. "I do, though."



Dasani and Chanel in 2013. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**Most people associate** Hershey with chocolate or the theme park named for the chocolate located in a town of the same name. All three things are owed to Milton S. Hershey, the Pennsylvania native who survived bouts of poverty as a child to become the candy magnate known as America’s “Henry Ford of Chocolate.” Before he died in 1945, Hershey (who had no children) left the bulk of his fortune to a school he created in 1909 to “educate children in need.” By the time Dasani enrolled, in 2015, 9,000 students had graduated. Pictures of them lined a corridor of the school — a long procession of white faces that began to include African Americans starting in 1968, followed by women nearly a decade later.

Today, nearly 2,000 children attend the tuition-free school, which requires students to live on campus. They are a cross-section of poor America: 39 percent are white, 32 percent Black and 18 percent Latino. Only low-income families can apply; the average student’s family earns \$23,574, which is below the federal poverty line. Most come from Pennsylvania, prioritized by the deed of the school’s trust, while a quarter have crossed state lines from as far away as Iowa, Texas, California and Puerto Rico.

Among Hershey’s students, Dasani’s struggles are not unusual. About one in five has been homeless, more than half have had a parent incarcerated and about half have been exposed to substance abuse in their families.

Children as young as 4 can go to Hershey, staying until they graduate from high school. Students live in suburban-looking villages owned and maintained by the school. Set on a sprawling campus, the oldest homes surround the original farmhouse where Milton was born. The newest ones resemble McMansions, with basketball courts and spacious carports.

Each home is the domain of one married couple, hired to oversee eight to 12 children. These “house parents” act as surrogate mothers and fathers, driving the students to soccer games and helping with their homework. The school’s staggering endowment — valued at more than \$17 billion — provides the amenities of a top university: eight tennis courts, three indoor pools, a 7,000-seat football stadium, an ice-skating rink. Hershey pays for braces, birthday presents, piano lessons, tutoring, therapy and other privileges known to families of means. The school has its own hair salon, clothing center and 24-hour health clinic with staff pediatricians. Before graduating, all students must learn to swim, drive a car and manage a bank account. Those who have kept up their grades and followed the school’s strict rules are given a college scholarship of \$95,000.



Dasani and Chanel at the Milton Hershey School in 2016. Andrea Elliott/The New York Times

Every year, an unknown number of students leave Hershey. The school's administrators would not disclose its average graduation rate but said that in 2015 — the year that Dasani enrolled — around one in 10 children was either expelled or dropped out. For those who graduate, success in college seems correlated with the age at which they entered Hershey. Sixty-one percent of students who enroll before age 10 complete a postsecondary degree, compared with only 51 percent of students who entered Hershey during high school.

It's unclear whether appearing in *The New York Times* helped Dasani get into Hershey. The school had never allowed a reporter on campus for an extended period, but administrators eventually agreed to give me access. With Chanel's permission, I would make 14 trips to see Dasani, staying in touch with her by phone, text and email and encouraging her to keep a daily journal that she shared with me.

The stated mission of the school is to “nurture and educate” its children “to lead fulfilling and productive lives.” Hershey's academic rigor tends to pay off: In 2019, more than 94 percent of students tested proficient or advanced in literature on Pennsylvania's keystone standardized tests — well over the state average. But test scores are only a fraction of the work. Students must also master “soft skills” — things like communicating well with others, resolving conflicts and expressing empathy.

Most children come to Hershey with a different skill set. They have spent their lives learning how to stay fed, warm or safe. They are primed for anything to go wrong at any moment, making them hypervigilant and distrustful of other people, including Hershey's staff. Children like Dasani are always “scanning the horizon for threats,” in the word of one administrator, which can lead to behavior that others find aggressive or selfish. The very things that helped them survive before arriving at Hershey can become impediments once they get there.

**On the afternoon** of Jan. 27, 2015, Dasani matriculates and heads to her new home, accompanied by her mother and sisters. A smooth driveway winds past the formal entrance of the house, where guests ring a doorbell that sounds like an organ. For more than half of Dasani's life, she has been homeless, living in seven different shelters and attending eight schools. She stares awe-struck at Student Home Sienna — a 10,365-square-foot, stone-facade manor designed to be “neo-eclectic with farm home elements.”

Dasani's housemother is 37-year-old Tabitha McQuiddy, a white Pennsylvania native with blond highlights and a long plaid skirt. She guides Dasani, her mother and sisters through the side door. All students enter this way, stopping in the mudroom to remove their day shoes. A hallway leads to the “guest powder room,” a gleaming kitchen and a dining room. A wooden stair rail reaches the second floor, where the words “together we make a family” adorn the wall.

Framed photos of Dasani's new housemates fill a glass-encased cabinet, near a prominent print of the Ten Commandments. While the school describes itself as nondenominational, Christian scripture is all around. The children attend a mandatory chapel service every Sunday and say grace before dinner.

Dasani, her mother and sisters follow Tabitha to a large supply closet filled with brand-name toiletries such as Nivea cream, ACT mouthwash and Prell shampoo. Nana spots a plastic box containing what might be dollar bills.

“You have money in there?” Nana asks.

“It's fake money,” Tabitha says, explaining that she runs the closet “like a store,” teaching the girls how to “manage themselves so that they don't overspend.”

Chanel periodically flashes Tabitha a smile. She has read the parent handbook, which advises her to have “a positive relationship” with the house parents and to “always remember we’re on the same team.”

Down the hall is Dasani’s new bedroom, which she will share with another girl. She walks inside, spotting a stack of clean sheets near the bed. She has her own dresser and armoire. She opens it, her mouth dropping.



Dasani's desk at Hershey in 2016. Andrea Elliott/The New York Times

“See how big they closet is?” Dasani says to her mother.

“Very nice,” Chanel says. “Stop saying ‘they.’ You’re *here* now.”

“Yeah, ‘my closet,’” Tabitha chimes in. “‘Look how big my closet is!’”

Soon it’s time to say goodbye. Tabitha stands near her husband, Jason, a stout, bearded 42-year-old man who favors wire-rimmed glasses and flannel shirts. Their sons — ages 8 and 11 — will soon be home from school, along with a gaggle of Hershey girls.

Tabitha holds Leo, the family’s new puppy. “Look over my baby now, OK?” Chanel tells the dog.

The two mothers hug. They have already discussed Dasani’s “four-week adjustment plan.” Chanel is allowed one weekly phone call to Dasani, at a predesignated time. There are no visits for a month — a separation that is designed to help incoming students form new bonds, particularly with their house parents.

This can bring a swell of emotions: sadness, guilt, confusion, rage. Some children rebel, hoping their transgressions will send them home. But the longer they can endure this separation, the more likely they are to meet the school’s goal of leading “fulfilling and productive” lives.

The unspoken message is clear. In order to leave poverty, Dasani must also leave her family — at least for a while.

**Dasani lies awake** that first night. She has never slept alone. She keeps reaching for Lee-Lee. “I don’t know how to sleep with nobody,” she will later tell me. Outside, the sky is wide and dark, the snow almost silver. Hershey is so quiet that any noise is jarring — the rustling of branches, the thrum of a truck.

Everything feels different, even the air. A few feet away, Dasani’s 13-year-old roommate is fast asleep. She, too, is a city girl. But she came from Trenton, N.J., eight years ago, which is long enough to learn how to sleep through the quiet.

It’s not just homesickness that keeps Dasani awake. She is feeling the pressure that Hershey represents. “I believe I can achieve my dreams in this school,” she writes in her journal. She makes little mention of her 11 housemates, for fear they might read the diary and turn against her. Earlier, they greeted Dasani warmly at dinner, bowing their heads for grace. She ate quickly, as if the food might vanish. New students are not used to second helpings or side dishes. Sometimes they guard their plates, hunching over each meal, or they try to ration it, hoarding food in their napkins.

“Every year we go through it,” Jason McQuiddy, Dasani’s new housefather, says. “You have to set it up like it’s a classroom when they first come.” He and his wife give a tutorial in table etiquette, demonstrating how to use a fork and knife. “You don’t have to hide your food,” Jason tells the children. “You don’t have to protect it.”

Each girl brings her own idiosyncrasies. The McQuiddys notice that Dasani cuts her food with a knife, then picks it up with her hand, placing it in her mouth. She is accustomed to eating street food in a rush. No one uses a fork with French fries or chicken wings, especially when the meal is shared by eight siblings.

---

## **‘I believe I can achieve my dreams in this school,’ she writes in her journal.**

---

The McQuiddys need no explanation. They have house-parented more than 100 children, from the streetwise to the rural. They expect Dasani to bring the “survival skill set” of a city child. She is unafraid of strangers or crowds. She can make quick decisions, undistracted by the honking of cars or the shoving of hands. She will do fine on the upcoming field trip to Philadelphia.

But the woods behind their house are another matter. For Dasani, this is unfamiliar terrain. The McQuiddys are not surprised when she announces, “I don’t do bugs” and is never going camping — “so don’t even try it.”

**Dasani’s first days** are carefully plotted. She has a medical exam, a therapy session, academic testing and a computer orientation. She goes on two excursions to Chocolate World, where she takes a trolley ride to learn how they make Hershey chocolate. A school dentist will soon give her two fillings and eventually a root canal.

But first, Dasani needs a wardrobe. The school’s Clothing Center spans more than 17,000 square feet, with floor-to-ceiling shelves, two fitting rooms and an alterations department. Dasani’s eyes travel the room, seeing crisply folded shirts and sweaters in every size, followed by rows of blazers and suits. There is an entire wall devoted just to socks.



Dasani was on the cheerleading team at Milton Hershey in 2015 and also ran track. Andrea Elliott/The New York Times

Dasani builds her school uniform, selecting polos in pink, orange, yellow and red, and a pair of khakis for each weekday. Formal clothes are next, as required for chapel: dress shirts and trousers, a pleated skirt and matching blazer. She completes the look with tights, flats and a charcoal coat with faux fur trim. For “leisure” time, she gets Levi’s jeans and sweatsuits, polka-dot shorts and shiny black Crocs. In the sleepwear section, she finds pajamas with a candy motif.

Dasani zips in and out of the dressing room. “That’s mine,” she says with each new item. “That’s mine! That’s mine!”

“Yes, it is,” Tabitha McQuiddy replies. “Yep. Yep.”

**On Feb. 1,** Dasani picks up the phone to hear her mother’s voice. They have not spoken since they parted five days earlier. Chanel had tried calling a few times, only to get the McQuiddys or the answering machine, which sounds like a sunny commercial: “Hi, you’ve reached Mr. and Mrs. McQuiddy and the ladies of Sienna!”

“What’s been going on?” Chanel asks Dasani.

“Nothing really. I was playing chess.”

“You was playing what?”

Dasani repeats the word: “Chess, Mommy. The game chess.”

“Oh, chess — chess,” Chanel says. “Oh, that’s good you learning that.”

Chanel mentions that one of Dasani’s uncles had come to visit. Dasani feels a pang of sadness and asks for Lee-Lee. Chanel explains that she is calling from the street, and Lee-Lee is at home.

“I was waiting for your call,” Chanel says.

“I was playing the game,” Dasani says, now dropping the word “chess.”

“Yeah, so you wasn’t even thinking about me,” Chanel says.

Dasani’s voice tightens. She explains that she had asked permission to call a few days ago, but her housefather reminded her of the transition schedule, which allows for one weekly call.

“Did he tell you I called?” Chanel asks.

“Yeah, and he told me that you said you loved me,” Dasani says.

Chanel pauses.

“Do you know that Papa ran away yesterday?” Chanel says, forgetting the school’s advice against sharing bad news.

“Papa ran away?” Dasani asks.

Chanel tells the story — how 7-year-old Papa left the house without a coat in below-freezing weather, wandering the North Shore of Staten Island for two hours. A stranger spotted him and called the police. Chanel had to pick Papa up from the hospital.

Dasani asks if he got in “trouble.”

“No, he didn’t get in trouble,” Chanel says haltingly. “But you know tomorrow’s gonna be a lot of trouble for me because of him.”

Dasani knows what her mother means. Once again A.C.S. will be investigating her parents on the suspicion that they are neglecting their children.

Dasani changes the subject, telling her mother that some of her classmates are from New York, including a girl who is “mad ghetto. More ghetto than me — ”

“She’s like bully ghetto?” Chanel asks, listening for more details. “Well, you wanna stay away from her, then. You wanna stay away from her. ‘Cause you don’t wanna pick up any of her bad habits.”

Chanel now takes command of the conversation, asking if Dasani is sleeping well (yes), if she is avoiding pork (yes), if she likes her house parents (yes) and her roommate (yes), and if she has new clothes (yes).

“I love you,” Chanel says before they get off the phone.

“Love you, too,” Dasani says.

“Lee-Lee was crying over you today?”

“Oh.”

“Lee-Lee was looking at your pictures. She like, ‘I miss Sani.’”

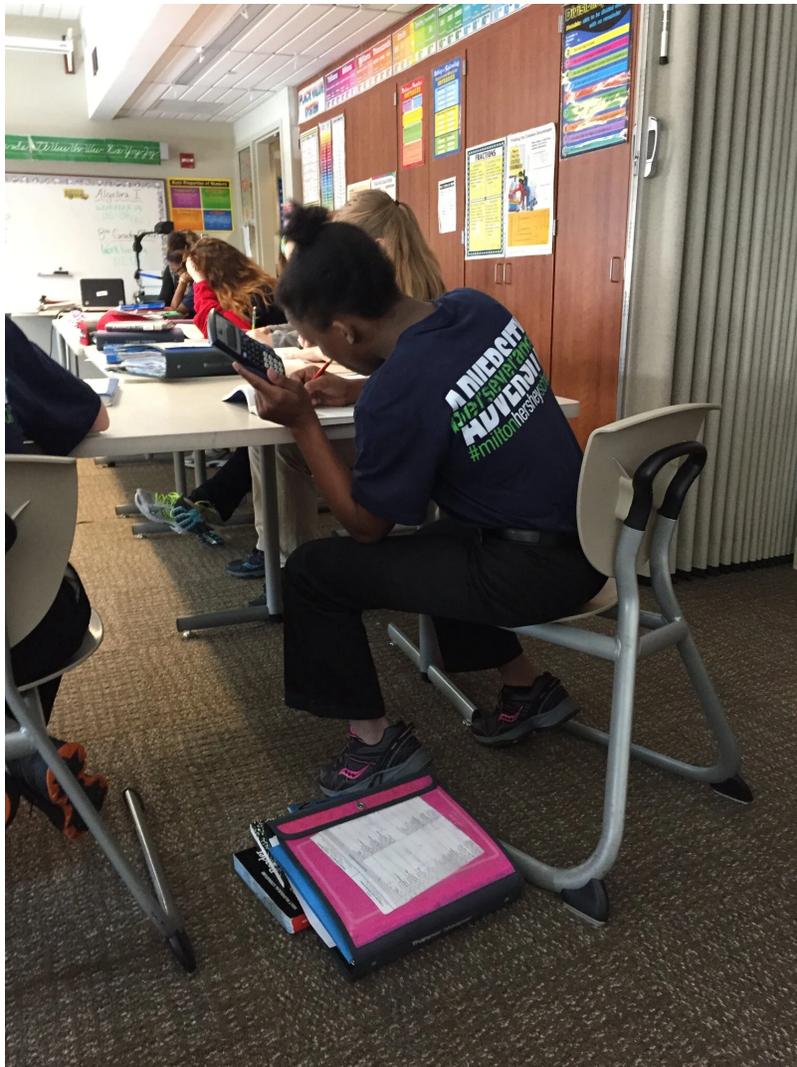
Dasani says nothing.

“Yeah, everybody’s good,” Chanel says. “And we’re all rooting for you to do your best out there.”

**In some ways**, the McQuiddys remind Dasani of her own parents. The dad cooks and the mom bakes. They are religious. They favor vegetables. They tell their children to study the dictionary. Their marriages are a yin-yang of extrovert (Chanel, Jason) and introvert (Supreme, Tabitha).

But in other ways, the McQuiddys are different. They call each other “honey” rather than “baby.” They don’t smoke or do drugs. Dasani never sees them reading, while Supreme is always in a book. He and Chanel are proud of being “self-taught.” Supreme got his G.E.D. while in prison after being convicted of a felony drug charge when he was 17. The McQuiddys went to college. They are more controlled, less spontaneous. There is no Wu-Tang bursting from the speakers at midnight, no dance battles in the living room. Most nights, Tabitha McQuiddy sits in the corner, knitting a scarf for each girl.

The girls’ schedule is just as predictable: They rise by 5:30 a.m., dress, make their beds, tidy their rooms, and at 6 a.m. their “team chores” begin. Jason McQuiddy rates each task on a “daily performance tracking sheet.” At 6:30 a.m., they have breakfast and Christian devotions. At 6:50 a.m., they brush their teeth. For the next half-hour, they are free to read or play chess, and at 7:35 a.m. they are off to school. Dinner is always at 6 p.m. and lights out at 9 p.m. This thumping routine is the pulse of Hershey. Dasani will absorb it by sheer repetition, until she is sleeping properly and eating healthfully and feeling physically safe. Only when such needs are met can she be expected to thrive.



Dasani in class at Milton Hersey School in 2015. The school provides supplemental tutoring and complete health and dental care. Andrea Elliott/The New York Times

On Dasani’s first day of school, she is most concerned about what to wear. She settles on a pink polo and beige khakis, smoothing her braids back with gel. Then she makes her bed, does her chores, eats breakfast and hops into the van, riding up a long, curvy road.

**Sign up for The New York Times Magazine Newsletter** The best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week, including exclusive feature stories, photography, columns and more. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

---

Hershey's middle school, where teachers distribute apples and granola bars, feels safe, even "peaceful," Dasani says. Everything is more quiet, including her own mind. She is no longer consumed by the usual worries — of Lee-Lee's bottle or the sound of gunfire. Each part of her day is now decided by other people. This could make a girl feel caged, but for Dasani, it has the opposite effect.

She feels free.

**Dasani stands next to** her armoire, opening the doors to let me see her bathrobe (always on the left), her sweatshirts (always on the right) and her formal clothes (always carefully hung). "They showed me how to organize my drawers," she says of the McQuiddys. She seems eager to please them, making her bed with military precision and leaving no chore undone. Other things prove more difficult. New students are weaned off junk food, and their sugar intake is policed. Dasani has never eaten this way. She finds herself craving Oreo cookies and Chicken McNuggets with sweet-and-sour sauce.

The McQuiddys are also teaching Dasani how to greet guests. She demonstrates the ritual: She must stand up, "look them in the eye," offer "a sturdy handshake" and say in a clear and confident voice, "Hello, my name is ..."

Learning to speak in "standard English" — what Dasani calls "talking white" — is a constant theme at Hershey, from its classrooms to its dinner tables. If Dasani says "'bout" instead of "about," she is corrected. "You gotta say every word — the correct word," Dasani tells me. "The whole word."

English has always been Dasani's favorite subject; math, her least. She came to Hershey two grade levels behind in math, so the school assigned her a tutor. Within a month of arriving, she is starting to excel. She soon has 80s on her report card, surpassing all expectations, even her own. She cannot believe she has A's for conduct and effort and a B in math.

"I was always a D or an F," she says. "I never did my homework."

Still, what Dasani wants most — what is driving her performance at school — is the reward of returning home. Spring break is around the corner.

"I just miss being there," she says. "I miss my siblings."

In their absence, Dasani latches on to Kali, a 13-year-old girl who lives down the hall. She has golden skin, brown curls and is — like Dasani — part Dominican.

Kali grew up on the outskirts of Philadelphia, in a neighborhood so violent that she and her five siblings rarely went outside. Her single mother works two jobs — one stocking shelves at Walmart and another bartending. "I think we have the same mind-set," Kali says of Dasani. "She's just more blunt about it than I am."



Dasani, Chanel and her sister Avianna in Brooklyn this year. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**Nine weeks after enrolling** at Hershey, Dasani boards a chartered bus on April 1 and heads to New York City. As the bus pulls into the Port Authority Bus Terminal, she searches for her mother from the window. She is desperate to hug Chanel and feel the folds of her warmth. The doors open. Children slam into their parents. They hop in tandem. They laugh and weep. Dasani pushes through the mayhem and into her mother's arms. She reaches around Chanel's waist to check if she is still fat, which means she is OK. Chanel lifts her chin above her daughter's head, which means Dasani is still a child.

That first night, Dasani and her siblings float on adrenaline. Everyone is talking and no one seems to listen, except for Avianna. She can hear the change in her closest sister. The first hint came as soon as she walked in the door, asking Lee-Lee, "What are they feeding you?"

A few months ago, Dasani would have said this another way, without the word "are" and without the "g" at the end of "feeding." *What they feedin' you?*

The new phrasing would be fine with Avianna if her sister left it at that. But Dasani is not just talking differently. She is correcting those who talk the old way. The siblings let this slide at first. They are excited to have their leader back, regardless of her current fixation on words. But their excitement wanes at mealtime when Dasani refuses to do all the dishes. The old Dasani did everything. She made the house run. "She used to pick up after us," Avianna tells me. "Now she only care about herself and that's it."

The new Dasani hews to the rules of another home, where each child must clean up after herself. Her siblings watch as she takes her own plate to the sink, rinses it off, puts it away and sits back down. "This is how we do it at Hershey," she says.

She wants them to learn what she is learning. Their clothing is heaped on the floor so Dasani shows her siblings how to fold, just like Tabitha McQuiddy showed her. Shirts go in one stack, pants in another. Avianna tries the exercise. "That's not how you fold your clothes!" Dasani quips.

Avianna cannot believe her sister.

"You changed!" she tells Dasani.

Chanel has also noticed this. Dasani went from saying "This is lit" to "This is amazing" and "awesome," words that Chanel mimics with a flat, nasal a. "She never even knew that word 'ah-MAY-zing,'" Chanel says. "She went from talking hood to talking with some class."

A few days later, Dasani exaggerates her recent strides at Hershey, telling Nana, “I’m doing 12th-grade work!”

Nana goes quiet.

“So how smart are you now?” Dasani says. “How you feel?”

To Avianna, this last question — which omits the verb “do” — sounds like the old Dasani. Her sister is back. She is once again dropping F-bombs, sleeping late and scarfing Takis Fuego hot chili pepper and lime tortilla chips.

It took no time at all.

**The return to Hershey** is never easy. Dasani’s housefather tries to soften the landing by making his homiest dish — lasagna. “Many of them haven’t eaten in the last five days and haven’t slept in the last five days,” he says. Some girls look relieved to be back. Others look numb. Dasani is among those who cry the first few nights, walking around with heavy eyes. Whatever happens at home tends to stay there. “We don’t talk about our business,” she says.

Over the next few weeks, Dasani makes no mention of her siblings in her journal. “Back at school,” Dasani writes on April 13. “Feel confident.” She has joined the track team and is training for the 100-meter dash. But her recent trip home has left its mark. Dasani seems unfocused and, at times, irritable. On April 22, 10 days after returning to Hershey, Dasani leans past a girl on the bus to holler out the window. The girl complains that Dasani is yelling in her ear. They begin arguing, calling each other “ho” and “bitch.”

Dasani lunges at the girl. She feels arms on her body. Students yank Dasani to the front of the bus where the driver, who has pulled over, is radioing for help. A staff member notifies Dasani’s housefather, Jason McQuiddy, who walks up the hill to where the bus is parked.

“We’ve got a real problem here,” the driver tells him before Dasani storms off to her student home. By the time McQuiddy catches up, she is sitting on the back-porch swing, staring at the yard.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on?” says McQuiddy, who waits patiently for Dasani to talk. He knows that “if she feels like she’s been heard, she’ll settle down.” He also wants Dasani to think about her role and how she could have handled the conflict differently.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “Be fake?” For Dasani, politeness is “fake” if it hides a person’s true feelings. Restraint is also “fake,” whereas giving someone the middle finger is “real.”

McQuiddy looks at her. “Do you know what code-switching is?” he asks.

All students at Hershey eventually learn about “code-switching”: the ability to switch between one linguistic or behavioral code and another. “When you’re here,” he tells Dasani, “you have to be, in a sense, a different person. It doesn’t take away from who you are. But it is just a different representation of who you are.”

Dasani wonders how much McQuiddy knows about switching between white America and Black America.

Her therapist, Julie Williams, seems better suited to address this. She is a Black woman working in a predominantly white town. She has been seeing Dasani twice a week, and they have grown close.

“I can’t be two different people,” Dasani tells Williams. “That’s just me, and you have to accept me for who I am.” Williams responds in a way that makes sense to Dasani: You remain the same person, with the same feelings and urges. But you are choosing not to act on every urge. “That’s not being two-faced,” Williams says.

Dasani thinks about this. It sounds more like editing, which she is learning in film class. Some scenes get cut to make the movie better. She can do this with her thoughts, cutting some out so that they never reach the audience.

But inside her, they will stay.

**On June 12, Dasani** graduates from Hershey’s middle school. She has yet to hear the news: Her mother is now homeless. Chanel had stopped attending her drug-treatment program, and A.C.S. caseworkers suspected that she was getting high, so a family-court judge ordered her to leave the family’s home.

Dasani’s mind wanders to her siblings. She shoos the thoughts away, like mosquitoes at dusk. But the memories keep returning, of Avianna’s hearty laugh and Lee-Lee’s squishy face. Not calling might hurt more than just picking up the phone. Finally, on Aug. 1, Dasani dials the number. She hears a voice she cannot place.

“Who is this?” she asks.

“Khaliq, dum-dum.”

“Why you sound like a grown man, Khaliq?”

“I don’t know.”

Dasani makes a face.

“Just remember, Khaliq, I’m always older than you.”

The phone passes from child to child, finally getting to Papa.

“Why did you pick me last?” he says.

Just the sound of Papa’s voice melts Dasani. She tells him, in her sweetest tone, that she saw a photograph of his new haircut. He wants to know when they will see her. She stumbles to answer as the phone passes to the smallest hand.

“Hi, Dasani,” Lee-Lee says, sounding like a different child. She never used to say Dasani’s full name. It was always “Sani.” This is a sign either that Lee-Lee has matured or that their bond has weakened.

“Do you miss me?” Dasani asks.

“Yeah.”

A few minutes later, Dasani hangs up. Ideally, a call to her family would have anchored her. Instead, she feels disconnected. Her face is empty of emotion. “If you show your feelings, it’s like you’re showing you’re weak,” she tells me. “I don’t show my feelings to nobody.”



Aviana and Dasani in New York this year. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**As Dasani prepares** to enter Hershey’s high school, she must leave the McQuiddys for another Hershey residence. On Aug. 2, 2015, the front door of Student Home Morgan opens to 63-year-old Jonathan Akers. He and his wife, Melissa, will be Dasani’s new houseparents. There is no part of Dasani’s New York that is unfamiliar to Jonathan Akers, from Staten Island’s North Shore to the Spanish Harlem of his in-laws. But at his core, Akers is — like Dasani — Brooklyn-made. He was born to Black parents in the housing projects of Canarsie. Both Jonathan and Melissa, a 47-year-old of Puerto Rican descent, would have qualified to attend Hershey as children had they known about it. They are what they call “graduates of poverty.”

Akers has a trim gray mustache, a military crew cut and soft brown eyes that crease at the corners. Golf he picked up in Hershey, whereas bowling he learned in Brooklyn. The two places share space inside him. He will quote Nietzsche in one breath and say “the hood” in the next. This is less a matter of “code-switching” than of coexistence. To the Black people who think he is “acting white” — and to the

white people who say he is “too urban” — he gives the same unapologetic message: “This is who I am.”

Dasani warms to him right away, calling him “Mister.” After unpacking, she and her housemates gather before him in the living room. “You’re gonna have some days — whether you’ve been here for a while or whether you’re new — that you’re gonna want to give up and say ‘This ain’t worth it,’” Akers says.

He hands out blank index cards. “If you have a big enough why, then you can endure almost any how,” he says, citing a key theme in the book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” the 1946 memoir by the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl.

Each girl must write the word “why” on her card followed by the reason why she is at Hershey.

Dasani’s “why” spills from her pen.

“To get a good education. To make a difference in my family.”

**Dasani leaps** into fall, joining Hershey’s cheerleading team, signing up for environmental science and scribbling her latest goals on the calendar at her tidy desk. On Oct. 9, she is sitting in a school auditorium, watching the movie “Unbroken,” when a staff member summons her to a conference room.

There, Dasani finds two caseworkers from New York City’s child-protection agency. It has been five months since Dasani was home, and she is unaware of all that has transpired. After her mother was ousted by A.C.S., Chanel moved to a Brooklyn shelter, leaving her husband on his own to care for seven children. They went without food stamps all summer because of a bureaucratic holdup, and by August their gas and hot water were cut off.

---

## **‘When I was in the house, did the kids get taken away? No.’**

---

Then, on Oct. 6, a judge authorized A.C.S. to remove Dasani’s siblings, citing the poor condition of their home. All eight children were now in the custody of A.C.S., including Dasani.

She looks at the two caseworkers as they break the news. She will remain at Hershey while her siblings are placed in foster care, to be divided up “in pairs.” Here, Dasani’s memory of the conversation goes blank. According to A.C.S. records, “the child” begins “to cry.” The caseworkers stop talking to give Dasani “a minute to release her feelings.” The next thing Dasani remembers is saying, “If anything — if you split them up — put the baby with one of them.” About 90 minutes later, she returns to the movie and sits down as if nothing happened. She knows nothing will ever be the same.

Three weeks later, at a diner near Hershey, I am sitting with Dasani as she slowly picks at her pancakes. She is certain that if she had remained in New York, her siblings would still be home. “When I left the house, that’s when everything started happening,” she tells me. “Did it or did it not?” The moment she chose Hershey, she was choosing herself at the expense of them.

“When I was in the house, did the kids get taken away? No. When I was in the house, did my mom get kicked out of the house? No. When I left the house, this is what happened. This is why I did not want to come to this dumb school.”

There is no reminding Dasani that A.C.S. also removed her mother back in 2011, when Dasani was still at home. There is no trace of the girl who, 11 months earlier, had wept with joy when she got into Hershey.



Dasani in New York this year. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**In English class**, Dasani is learning about different types of language. Colloquial language, Dasani writes in pen, is “a regional dialect that is only spoken and understood by a group of people; includes slang.”

Objective language, she continues, is “dealing with facts,” whereas subjective language is “influenced by a person’s emotions, prejudice and opinion.” She distinguishes between the “literal,” which “means what is said,” and the “figurative,” which uses “devices to create an image in the reader’s mind.”

If Dasani were to describe — in a figurative way — what happens on Jan. 8, 2016, she would say that her anger had been swelling like a giant cloud. If a cloud gets too big, it must rain. This anger has its source in many things, going back many years. The absence of Dasani’s biological father. The addiction that stalks Chanel and Supreme. The degradation of growing up homeless. The burden of caring for seven siblings — only for them to be separated while Dasani was away. It is Hershey’s staff and students who now stand in Dasani’s rain. “I tend to let out my anger on them, with my family in mind,” she says. “It’s more anger than it would have been.”

The literal events of Jan. 8 are as follows: Shortly after track practice, a girl named Innocence gets on Dasani’s nerves. They begin to argue. Dasani loses control of her body. She charges at Innocence, pummeling her face before other students intervene.

Dasani is placed on probation, without access to a phone, and is barred from competing in track meets. Yet she continues to lash out, punching a boy in school, insulting her math teacher, talking back to the Akers. The worst incident comes at the end of January when Dasani is cleaning up after dinner. She grabs a small steak knife, playfully jabbing it at her housemate.

“Come on, Dasani, cut it out,” another girl says.

Dasani keeps poking the knife into the air. When her roommate alerts Melissa Akers, Dasani starts slamming dishes around the kitchen. She bolts past the Akerses’ office into her room. As Melissa follows behind, Dasani slams the door in her housemother’s face.

Akers barges in. They begin to argue, their voices rising. A security guard is summoned.

Whenever a student causes others to feel unsafe, that student must be mentally evaluated. Dasani will spend the night at the school’s health center.

The Akerses explain this to Dasani.

“Are you OK if we pray before you go?” Melissa asks.

Dasani gives a one-shoulder shrug.

The Akerses kneel before Dasani, taking her hand. They close their eyes. She listens in silence. Only when the Akerses finish the prayer do they see that Dasani is crying.

**Dasani is now** on behavioral “restitution,” Hershey’s version of detention. She will be cleaning stables, raking leaves and doing other “hard chores.” But lately, the Akerses are seeing some improvements. She is learning to apologize and to express gratitude. Back in New York, to say “I’m sorry” was to show weakness. To say “Thank you” meant you needed help. Dasani’s pride and self-sufficiency, which have enabled her to come this far, could now be considered a detriment. They interfere with what Jonathan Akers calls “that healing part of her life.” He wants to see Dasani “allowing herself to become vulnerable and be able to really face some of those things that hurt her so much.”

On Feb. 19, 2016, Dasani’s phone rings. More than a year has passed since she came to Hershey. She puts the call on speaker phone as I listen. “You sound so white right now,” says her stepsister, Nana, who is calling with Avianna.

Nothing offends Dasani’s 14-year-old ego like hearing that she sounds “white.” She wants to tell her sisters that they sound “stupid” because “they don’t know how to talk,” though Dasani can feel that way at Hershey sometimes.

Maybe her sisters are right. “I’m gonna turn white at Hershey, and I don’t wanna be white,” she tells me after they hang up. “I wanna go home.”

For Dasani, “home” is more than a place. “Home is the people. The people I hang out with. The people I grew up with. That, to be honest, is really home. Family who have had my back since Day 1. It doesn’t have to be a roof over my head.” She pauses: “At Hershey, I feel like a stranger. Like I don’t really belong. In New York, I feel proud. I feel good. I feel accepted when I’m in New York.”

She wants to feel at home wherever she goes. And that means having the freedom to speak like her sisters — without hearing the voice of correction, nudging her from “ain’t” to “isn’t.”

“It just makes me feel like I can’t really be myself. I always gotta be aware of how I talk, all the time.”

Most of Dasani’s mentors at Hershey are Black: Jonathan Akers; her therapist, Julie Williams; her cheerleading and track coaches. They have tried, in their own ways, to challenge the notion that one must “be white” to succeed.

Dasani is not sure she believes them. “I’m not saying I’m not gonna be successful, but I’m still gonna keep the streets in me.”

She has the seed of an idea. She will major in business, starting a family-run music-production company. Nana can draw, and Maya is good with colors. Hada is a natural writer. The three of them can design the ads, whereas Avianna is more of a performer. “She can fake it till she makes it,” Dasani says. And their mother will promote this business far and wide, using her street smarts to find investors.

Dasani is waiting for the right moment to tell them her plan.

**On March 14**, Dasani gets into another serious fight, attacking a girl so ferociously that she lands a disciplinary infraction for “serious acts of aggression.” Over Easter, she must go to “intercession,” a temporary residence for students who have misbehaved. She is so bitter that she tells the Akerses she wants to leave their home permanently.

She blames everyone but herself. The girl she fought is to blame: “Don’t disrespect me and you won’t feel my fire.” The Akerses are to blame: “If they wanted to help me be successful, they should have done that by now.” Her parents are to blame: They “don’t listen. And they’re lazy. And they do nothing to help me.”

The school sees it differently. In fact, the assistant principal, Tara Valoczki, has recruited Chanel to help create a new “behavioral plan,” to be implemented by a team that includes Dasani’s therapist, her athletic coaches and the Akerses. To change Dasani’s behavior, the team must identify her triggers — any thoughts, words or actions that cause her to lose control. It does not help that Dasani hates the word “trigger,” which makes her think of gunfire. It brings Dasani back to New York City’s streets. Yet in both places, her “trigger” is the same: feeling disrespected.

---

**‘You are on thin ice and it’s gonna crack and you gonna drown.’**

---

Dasani's team wants to disrupt this pattern. There is no controlling another girl's behavior, but Dasani must learn to contain her fire. With this in mind, Valoczki drafts a "behavioral agreement" for Dasani to sign: When she starts to feel upset, she must remove herself physically, going to a "safe space" such as Valoczki's office at school. Dasani's trusted adults must then give her at least five minutes to talk. She needs to air her grievances. Only then is she able to listen.

A few days later, Dasani leaves Valoczki a note: "This is Dasani. Feeling agitated. Needed to talk to you. Took a few minutes. Went back to class."

Valoczki soon arranges for Dasani to call her mother, who has been briefed on the behavioral agreement. Valoczki hands Dasani an iPad so she can FaceTime with her mother. Chanel is heading to her new drug-treatment program, a methadone clinic in Harlem when the call comes. She looks at the screen of her phone, seeing her daughter's glowing face.

"You look so much better than New York City," Chanel beams.

Dasani chuckles. She holds the iPad close, staring back at her mother. There is no question that Chanel has lost weight. She seems tired, smiling only with effort.

"You look comfortable," Chanel says. "But you gotta learn to control your temper."

Dasani jumps to her own defense, recounting the recent fight, play by play. Slowly, Chanel's lip curls into a smile. She never ceases to be impressed by her daughter's might.

"And so who got the trouble for it?" Chanel asks.

"Both of us! They gave me a Level 3 because I hit her back — "

"Because you hit like a man," Chanel says proudly. "That's why."

"That's not my problem! Don't hit me in the face!"

Chanel laughs.

"But you hit like a man, see? It's a different force."

"That's what all the boys say!" Dasani says. "They be like 'Damn, you hit like a man!' "

"It's a different force of hit," Chanel continues. "'Cause we stronger than the average woman. So you need to know that. And you need to know that we have strength like horses. And you need to know that, and you have to control that because I'm telling you, we will *hurt* something. ..."

Chanel has veered off script.

"But I don't wanna support that," Chanel says, remembering the behavioral agreement. "If you do the right thing, I don't mind letting you come down for every holiday. But if you aren't doing the right thing," she adds, then why "am I letting you come home?"

"So, I can do the right thing, take a break?" Dasani says in disbelief. "I think I need a trip home! I'm starting to sound white! I'm starting to talk with proper grammar!"

"I know, I know, boobie," her mother says softly. "That's why we coming to steal you."

Every time Chanel betrays the Hershey script, she tries to recover. "Yo, I gotta go," Chanel finally says. "My program is gonna close at 2:30."

"All right."

"So listen. I'm gonna call you every day at the student home, right? But our deal is you gonna behave from this point on and get in no fights," Chanel says. "'Cause I really need you to graduate from there and do what you gotta do. I really, really need you to do that for me ... for you."

Dasani is silent.

"You understand? Didn't nobody else get this opportunity like you. You are blessed. I'm telling you. And use your blessings. Use them wisely. And it doesn't seem like it's gonna pay off now. But at the end, baby girl, it's gonna pay off. And you gonna be so glad that you did it. You gonna kiss my wrinkly-ass toes — "

Dasani starts laughing and says, "No, I'm not!"

"You gonna kiss the ground that I walk on with my wrinkly-ass old toes. Thanking God ... that you don't have to eat from here." Chanel points her phone at the "Relief Bus," a mobile food pantry parked near 125th Street. "See this bus?" she says. "I eat from this bus. ... I eat from this bus, right here, every day. Soup and bread. You see? You see the people?"

“Yes.”

“That’s where I’m at,” Chanel says. “You don’t want to be there with me. All right?”

Dasani looks devastated.

“Do what you gotta do,” Chanel says. “Get your education, girl. You hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Cause I didn’t have it, and I want you to have it,” Chanel says, her face twisting up. “I’m shedding blood and tears for you.”

Dasani wipes her cheek and nods.

“These are strong tears,” Chanel says. “These ain’t tears of pain.”



Dasani in New York. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**Despite all the tumult**, Dasani goes on to earn A’s in five classes, including law and business. But her standardized test scores are low, so she must stay for summer school. Nor did she qualify for the district track competition. Her speed in the 200-meter race had fallen short by a fraction of a second.

“I played around on that track a lot, so I didn’t focus,” Dasani tells me by phone. “When it was time to run, I would complain.”

She is sounding older, more self-possessed. She seems eager to reflect, taking responsibility when bad things happen. She keeps thinking of her matriarchs, taking inspiration in their example. “I have my grandmother’s genes. Grandma Joanie did sports. I have my mom’s thinking and communicating. I can advocate for stuff.”

On May 24, Dasani walks into a conference room to find her mother standing there. They have not seen each other in six months.

“Hi, baby!” purrs Chanel as Dasani rushes into her arms. “Hi, babeee.”

Dasani is taller now, with fuller hips. She stands upright, hands in pockets, wearing a royal-blue polo. Her hair is pulled into a polished bun. The child is gone.

Chanel gently runs her hand across Dasani's cheek.

"Look at your face all broken out, pimple-face Annie," Chanel says, wrapping her arms around Dasani like a nest, holding her in place.

Soon, Chanel is rifling through Dasani's book bag. "What is it about, 'To Kill a Mockingbird?'" she asks, holding the book that Dasani is almost done reading. Chanel is proud to have recently finished two novels she found on the street: "The Dopefiend" and "The Adventures of Ghetto Sam and the Glory of My Demise." But she keeps this to herself as Dasani recounts Harper Lee's plot: how a white widower named Atticus helped a Black man named Tom Robinson who was wrongly accused of rape.

"I think we seen that movie," Chanel says.

Soon, she and Dasani are play-fighting. When she presses her body against Dasani, the teenager pushes back.

"Mom, I'm stronger than you!"

With that, Chanel challenges her daughter to an arm-wrestling match.

They take their seats, facing each other.

"One, two, three ..." Chanel says. "Go!"

Dasani has no chance, and they both know it. Out of kindness, Chanel holds her daughter's fist aloft rather than crushing it down.

"You're kind of strong, though," Chanel sniffs. "But you'll never be stronger than me."

**Three months into** Dasani's sophomore year at Hershey, she packs a bag for the Thanksgiving break. She has not been home in a year. Her siblings are now scattered across four addresses — Papa, in a foster home on Staten Island; Hada, Maya and Lee-Lee, with their uncle's girlfriend in Brooklyn; Avianna and Nana in a foster home in Brooklyn; and Khaliq, at a secure juvenile-detention facility in Westchester, where he was sent after being charged with assault. "There's no home for you," Chanel keeps telling her daughter.

Prevented from seeing her parents without court-ordered supervision, Dasani must spend the holiday at a temporary foster home on Staten Island. She scrambles to visit her closest sister, 14-year-old Avianna, whose foster mother insists on chaperoning. When they finally arrange to meet, along with Nana, at a Popeyes in Brooklyn, the foster mother offers them nothing to eat. They are in a hurry, the woman explains, because they are going to see a play at her church. Dasani is not invited. Then she hears Nana saying "stepmother" to describe Chanel — a word never used in all the years they were together.

"She raised you!" Dasani snaps. With that, the foster mother whisks Nana and Avianna out the door. In a few more months, she will treat Dasani's sisters to Red Lobster to "commemorate" their first anniversary together, telling the girls that she wants to adopt them.

Avianna has stopped talking to Dasani.

**The fracturing of** Dasani's family follows her back to Hershey. Her grades drop. Her language is foul. Chanel watches this from afar. Only two and a half years stand between her daughter and graduation. A blink of a girl's life. Chanel wishes Dasani could see how quickly the time will fly. Before she knows it, she will be stepping into the cap and gown that none of her matriarchs got to wear — not her mother, not Grandma Joanie, not her great-grandmother Margaret.

Dasani would be the first. "You don't gotta like Hershey," Chanel keeps telling Dasani. "All you gotta do is smile until you walk across that stage." She tries to scare Dasani: "You are on thin ice and it's gonna crack and you gonna drown." But Dasani cannot see past this moment. She rolls her eyes, ignoring Chanel's argument that there is "no home" in New York, that "it's just weed and the projects and having babies."

Nor is Dasani swayed by Jonathan Akers when he talks his best game: "I know you don't wanna be hanging with all them drug-dealing boys that ain't got no life and nothing to do but mess with girls' hearts."

Every plea falls flat. Dasani keeps acting out, racking up 15 behavioral reprimands in the span of two months. By the end of January 2017, she is on the brink of expulsion. She goes on Facebook, warning that she is "bouta have a fight and be gone from the school."

It takes four more weeks. On the afternoon of Feb. 28, 2017, Dasani and Kali are walking home from school when they see a student on the path. She is only in eighth grade but seems eager to be noticed and has already clashed with Dasani a few times.

"That's the girl I was gonna punch," Dasani says loudly. The girl replies that she, too, was planning to "beat up" Dasani. Her friends laugh. Then Dasani hears the girl saying "dumb bitch."

Kali is getting nervous.

"Let's just go," she tells Dasani. "Let's just go."

The eighth grader takes off her belt, handing it to her friends and walking toward Dasani. “No! No! No!” Kali says.

As the girl charges at them, Kali grabs Dasani by the waist, trying to hold her back. Somehow, perhaps by accident, the eighth grader kicks Kali in the stomach. Dasani’s best friend is now wincing in pain.

“When Kali got hit, I felt some type of way,” Dasani says. “I just — I blacked out.”

A cellphone video of the fight shows Dasani striking the eighth-grade girl. By the time Hershey’s security guards intervene, the girl has a busted lip, a bloody nose and a swelling eye. Dasani returns home, wearing a yellow polo stained with the girl’s blood.

Hershey alerts the police that a minor has been injured. Dasani faces an assault charge, though it is later dropped. She is moved to the health center and banned from campus. A few weeks later, Chanel calls Dasani.

“I got something to tell you.”

“What?”

“You’re discharged from the school.”

“What you mean, Ma?”

“They terminated you.”

A silence passes.

“Well, there’s one good thing about it,” Dasani finally says. “I can see you more often.”

Chanel tries to contain her anger. Dasani was the only child who remained safe, more than a hundred miles from the projects. “I was trying to shield you,” Chanel says. “Now I gotta worry about a knife in your face.”

Dasani searches for the right thing to say. She had tried, at least for a while, to succeed at Hershey.

“I was trying to do it for you,” Dasani says.

“I guess that was the problem,” Chanel says. “I wanted it more than you.”

“I wanted it,” Dasani says.

“Well, it’s gone now, sweetie. It’s gone.”





Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

**Only later, when Dasani** looked back on this moment, did she begin to understand what happened. She saw that her anger — her violent outbursts — were a response to feeling “depressed.” She had denied symptoms of depression while at Hershey, where 14 percent of her classmates were taking psychotropic medications. Even if the school had prescribed antidepressants, Dasani said she would have refused them.

Her depression, she insisted, was not the problem. It was a reaction to the problem, which nothing could fix. Her family was broken. And for this Dasani blamed herself. She chose to leave home. And by doing so, she not only left her siblings. She abandoned the person who needed her most: her mother.

“I felt like I did something wrong,” Dasani told me. “I felt like I left her at the wrong time. Like, I left her too early. Like she wasn’t — she wasn’t ready for that leap.” She paused. “I was really disappointed, though, ’cause I thought she could handle it. But then it was like she couldn’t.”

In the four years since leaving Hershey, Dasani’s life has taken many turns. At 15, she entered foster care, later transferring to a group home and falling in with a gang. She continued to lash out violently and have run-ins with the law. But she never stopped trying, as she put it, to “move forward and change my actions.” She found a mentor at her public high school in Brownsville and, in 2019, Dasani became

the first child in her family to graduate. By then, she and Avianna were reunited with their mother, who eventually also got custody of Papa; they were all living in a Brooklyn shelter. The rest of the family was splintered: Supreme was homeless, Khaliq was incarcerated, Nana remained in foster care and the three youngest sisters were still with their uncle's girlfriend.

In September, Dasani hit a milestone: She started classes at LaGuardia Community College, majoring in business administration. She hopes to make it to a four-year college like her friend Kali, who enrolled at Temple University in 2019 after graduating from Hershey with the scholarship given to students who follow the rules.

Dasani knows that her exit from Hershey might be seen as self-sabotage or even a form of educational suicide. But for Dasani, succeeding at Hershey would have required a different kind of death. It would have meant losing — even killing off — a basic part of herself. “It was like they wanted you to be someone that you wasn’t,” she says. “If I talk the way I naturally talk — to them — like, something’s wrong with me.”

Again and again, she thinks of her mother. Chanel wasn’t ready for that leap. Perhaps Dasani wasn’t ready either. But would she ever have been? To leap from her mother was to leap from herself.

---

This article is adapted from “Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival and Hope in an American City,” by Andrea Elliott, to be published by Random House on Oct. 5.

Andrea Elliott is an investigative reporter. Since joining The Times in 2003, she has specialized in long-form, immersive journalism projects. Her three-part series, “An Imam in America,” was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing. @andreaelliott

Ruth Fremson is a photographer, based in Seattle, who covers national stories. She is a Pulitzer-prize-winning photographer who previously covered international news, primarily in the Middle East and South Asia. @rfremson

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 32 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: When Dasani Left Home