



This is not a fire hydrant.

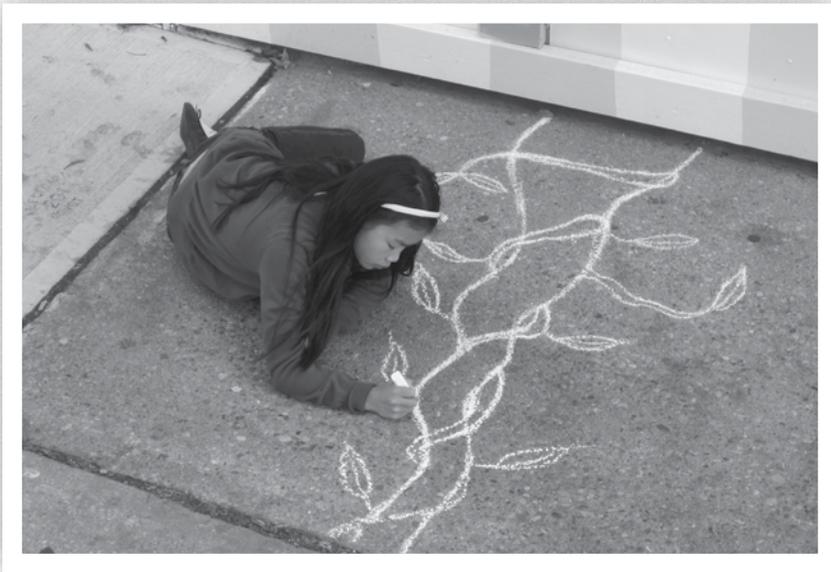
It's a photograph of a fire hydrant. And the truth is, a hydrant isn't always a hydrant.

Sometimes it's a perch.

I stood on my perch to take a picture of Ruby. Ruby is Mr. Lam's daughter. Mr. Lam is the owner of McCreary's Corner Store, which is a lie, since the store is in the middle of the block and should be called McCreary's Nowhere-Near-the-Corner Store. Most of the time,

when Mr. Lam is inside, scanning the aisles for shoplifters, Ruby is outside, drawing pictures with chalk.

Once Ruby knows what she's going to draw, it's a short walk between *decide* and *done*. I took a bunch of photographs to add to my *Sidewalk Series*. That's what I call my pictures of Ruby and her sidewalk drawings. Ruby crouched on one spot. Ruby blowing chalk dust. Ruby carefully tracing a line.



She was adding another leaf to a beanstalk (no Jack) and I was on my perch when I heard them. Ryan, Jared, and Med are a thunder-and-black-cloud combination. You know a storm is coming before a drop of rain hits the ground.

Hey, mutant!

Ryan raised his hands, as if he was under arrest.

Don't shoot!

He grinned. Then Med and Jared grinned, as if they hadn't heard the line a thousand times before.

What're you doing up there?

All three of them surrounded the hydrant.

You waiting to put out a fire? Ryan asked.

I didn't say anything. Whatever I said would be twisted and sharpened and flung right back at me.

Ruby was watching from one corner of her eye. She was trying not to look, but I could see it was a busy corner.

You don't look like much of a hydrant.

Ryan looked at Jared and Med.

Does the dipstick look like a fire hydrant to you?

Jared and Med shook their heads. Ryan took a swing at my ankles. I fell to the ground and ended up on my knees, next to Ruby's beanstalk.

Ryan walked over and pulled a matchbook out of his pocket. He lit a match. He pinched it between his fingers, then held the flame about an inch away from my face.

I blew out the match and extinguished his grin.

Then he smiled again, slowly. **So you *do* think you're a hydrant.**

I stared at a beanstalk leaf. I didn't know what he would do next. Hot one minute, cold the next. Ryan is like the weather, only none of his clouds has a silver lining.

He turned to Jared and Med and pretended to be concerned. **He's too dry for a hydrant,** he said. He took his water bottle out of his backpack. **We're here to help.**

The bottle was half-filled. Then it wasn't.

That's better.

I felt the water run down my back. My shirt got heavy and damp. I covered my camera with both hands.

Ryan motioned to Jared and Med with a small nod. They nodded back. By the time Med was finished, my pants were soaked. Ryan orders, they obey. That's why I call them Joined at the Hip. I've been their target practice since kindergarten. Most days I'm more target than practice.

Jared had just taken the cap off his water bottle when I saw Ruby's beanstalk getting dark-spot wet. I knocked the bottle out of his hands. The bottle — and most of the water — landed on Ryan's feet.

Ryan yanked me up by the collar and started to twist my shirt. Then he stopped. Mr. Lam had stepped out of his store.

Are you okay? Ryan asked me. He put his hand on my shoulder. Ryan the sugar-coated stone. You can't see what's inside.

Did you see what happened? he asked Mr. Lam. Every word was sweet and smooth. **We got here and found him like this.**

Mr. Lam didn't answer. He stared at Ruby: *I want you inside.* He stared at Ryan: *I want you out of here.* Then he stared at waterlogged me: *What the heck?*

Ruby poked her head out from behind her father. Mr. Lam waited for Joined at the Hip to finish pretending to care about me. They tugged at my soaked shirt. Patted my soaked back. Adjusted my camera strap. They took their sweet time. Ryan tried to make it sweeter until Mr. Lam grunted. Mr. Lam grunts a lot, like my father. They both speak Grunt.

Ryan walked away. Med and Jared followed. Mr. Lam led Ruby back into the store.

I was the only one left. Me and a bruised beanstalk. Some water from Jared's bottle had spilled as it spun out of his hand. I grabbed the chalk that Ruby had left on the sidewalk and tried to repair the damage.

I was halfway up the stalk before I noticed Ruby poking her head out of the door. She gave me a smile so small I could have put it in my pocket and forgotten it was there. She opened the door wider and wider and wider.

I stepped inside. Ruby disappeared.

Someone named McCreary must have owned McCreary's Middle-of-the-Block Store a thousand years ago, but Mr. Lam never changed the name. Nothing ever changes at McCreary's, especially Mr. Lam's attitude. He hates kids, which is a problem because the place is wall-to-wall kids at lunchtime and after school. Joined at the Hip steal chips and chocolate bars from him, but they're always polite, so he never suspects them. He thinks other kids are stealing from him instead, and yells **Pay, pay!** at all of us. Some kids call him Mr. Paypay behind his back. Other kids don't wait for him to turn around.

As I stood by the door, Mr. Lam kept watching me, even though I had never stolen anything. That's what happens when you have a different-looking face. People look at you differently. Most my face is normal but "most" isn't enough to stop all the stares. Once abnormal moves into the neighborhood — scars up my neck and across one cheek — normal might as well pack up and leave.

I'm glad I wasn't wearing my hoodie that day or Mr. Lam's dirty looks would have been dirtier. He thinks anyone who wears a hoodie is up to no good. Mine has a big-as-a-plate camera lens printed on the

back. I wear it on days when I get tired of stares. A hoodie is a scar's best friend.

Ruby showed up from the back of the store holding a paper towel roll. She gave it to me. I said, **Thank you.** She didn't say anything. I had a feeling her shyness had swallowed her smile. You can't tell she's shy in any of my *Sidewalk* photographs.

I dried myself off with the paper towels, then bought some candy as a way of saying thanks to Ruby for opening the door.

Mr. Lam stared at me as I left. If he was waiting for the truth about what had happened with Ryan, he would have a long wait. The truth is like our kitchen wall. It looks yellow. It is yellow. But there's more than one yellow. Truth, like yellow, comes in a thousand different shades.