

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Shawn McDaniel. My life is like one of those "good news-bad news" jokes. Like, "I've got some good news and some bad news—which do you wanna hear first?"

In the jokes, it's always the good news first, so here goes: I've spent my entire time on planet Earth, all fourteen (almost fifteen!) years I've been alive, in Seattle. Seattle is actually a hundred times cooler than you could believe unless you lived here too. Some people gripe and moan about the rain and the weather, but I love Seattle. I even like the rain.

Our house is about a mile from the Seattle Center, home of the Space Needle, Key Arena where the Sonics play, and the Pacific Science Center. And we're only about a mile and a half from Bell

Town, the unofficial former Grunge Capital of the universe. I'm the youngest kid in our family, three years younger than my sister, Cindy, and two years younger than my brother, Paul, who, although I'd hate for them to know I admitted it, are pretty cool for a brother and sister.

Okay, that's good news, huh? Here's some more: I have this weird—I don't know what you'd call it—ability? Gift? Power? Whatever name you want to give it, the thing is that I can remember everything I ever hear, perfectly, with total recall. I mean *Everything! Perfectly! Totally!* I don't know of anybody else, anywhere, who can do this. Most people remember bits and pieces of things they've heard in life, but I've got it all, every sound, ever.

This started when I was three or four years old. At first I could only remember most of what I heard. But by the time I was five years old, everything I heard just stayed in my head. I can remember people talking, TV commercials, every melody I've ever listened to from boring, brain-dead country Muzak to nasty rap lyrics, to the theme music from *Jeopardy!*, to—well—everything: lines from movies, overheard conversations that strangers were having in the street, like—"Well, do you still love him or not?" I heard one lady say this to another lady while they were waiting for the bus in front of our house, and *swoosh* came the sound of the bus along the wet

road, and its brakes went *squeal* . . . *eeeeekkk* and the other lady answered, "I don't know. I haven't eaten turkey since he left on Thanksgiving."

For all you know, I might remember, perfectly, what you said to your girlfriend two years ago when I overheard you two fighting outside the Orange Julius at Northgate, or what your dad said to you in Champs when you were ten, and you and he were shopping for a baseball mitt. Remember, you wanted that Ken Griffey Jr. autographed model but your dad said it cost too much. He wanted you to buy a cheaper one made in Taiwan. Your dad said, "Come on, I can write Ken Griffey Jr. right in here," and he pointed at a spot in the pocket of the glove, and you said, "Can you really do that?" And your dad said, "Has the pope got a bullet in him?" And you both laughed. I'm not making it up. It happened. And if I heard you again, even once, after all these years, I'd recognize you, I'd remember your voice, the sound of it, perfectly.

I hope I'm not coming off as conceited here. I'm sure I am. I mean, I *do* think that my hearing memory is kind of amazing, but it's not like it's made me rich or famous. I just happen to have this one talent that I know makes me gifted and special—yuck! I hate that word "special" when it's applied to people. As in "he's a very *special* person." Geez! Who isn't! But the other side of people is true too.

Everybody has negatives about themselves, stuff they wish wasn't a part of them. The bad news about us.

I could go on about my good news for hours, but you probably want to hear the punch line, my bad news, right? Well, there isn't that much, really, but what's here is pretty wild. First off, my parents got divorced ten years ago because of me. My being born changed everything for all of us, in every way. My dad didn't divorce my mom, or my sister, Cindy, or my brother, Paul—he divorced *me*. He couldn't handle my condition, so he had to leave. My condition? Well, that brings us to the guts of my bad news.

One bad news deal is that in the eyes of the world, I'm a total retardate. A "retard." Not "retard" like you might use the word to tease a friend who just said or did something stupid. I mean a *real* retard. Real in the same way that total means *total*. As in *total retard*. Everybody who knows me, everybody who sees me, everybody, anybody who even gets near me would tell you I'm dumb as a rock. Let me illustrate through the wonders of science.

Every year the school district sends out a school psychologist (scientist) to test me for IEPs (Individual Educational Plans). And every year since I was six, the psychologist gives me a bunch of tests ("scientifically normed and standardized"), which

are mainly intelligence tests filled with shapes and colors, square pegs and round holes, and "Who was George Washington?" and "What's two plus one?" And every year I sit there and miss every question, fling the blocks into the air or drop them all over or smack myself in the eye with one. Then the shrink goes in and gives my mom a number: $I.Q. = 1.2$, or mental age 3 to 4 (that's months, not years). Then the psychologist packs up his scientific garbage and moves on to the next dummy.

This has gone on for eight years now. Every year, year in and year out. Yep, according to the world I'm dumb as a fence post. I've heard the docs explain why they think I'm so stupid to my parents and my parents explain it to their friends about a trillion times. They think it's because my brain doesn't work. They don't know that is only partially true.

Focusing the Reader

"Love," by William Maxwell, is a favorite short story of mine. I was reminded of this story recently as I was eating breakfast and scanning the newspaper. Turning to the obituary section, I was startled and saddened to read of the passing of Julian Foster, who had been a political science professor of mine in college. Dr. Foster was one of those exemplary teachers who developed a passion in his students for his subject matter. He was the first teacher to make me understand the roots of both political liberalism and political conservatism; in doing so, he shaped my thinking well into adulthood. His enthusiasm for political science was infectious—so much so that I went on to become a congressional intern. Julian Foster's class was always challenging and invigorating, and it was the one class I always looked forward to attending. Today, more than twenty years later, I am thankful he was a teacher of mine. My life is richer for it.

There are many Julian Fosters out there—teachers who touch us, who stay in our hearts years after we leave their classes. When I share "Love" with my students, I frame the story by telling them the story of a teacher who meant a great deal to me. I ask them to reflect on a special teacher in their lives, briefly pausing to allow time for them to write and share their recollections.

Effective First-Draft Reading

Although my students write and share their teacher memories before reading William Maxwell's "Love," I ask you simply to hold a memory of a special teacher in your mind as you read this story about another remarkable teacher, Miss Vera Brown.

Love

Miss Vera Brown, she wrote on the blackboard, letter by letter in flawlessly oval Palmer method. Our teacher for the fifth grade. The name might as well have been graven in stone.

As she called the roll, her voice was as gentle as the expression in her beautiful dark brown eyes. She reminded me of pansies. When she called on Alvin Ahrens to recite and he said, "I know but I can't say," the class snickered, but she said, "Try," encouragingly, and waited, to be sure that he didn't know the answer, and then said, to one of the hands waving in the air, "Tell Alvin what one fifth of three eighths is." If we arrived late to school, red-faced and out of breath and bursting with the excuse we had thought up on the way, before we could speak she said, "I'm sure you

couldn't help it. Close the door, please, and take your seat." If she kept us after school it was not to scold us but to help us past the hard part.

Somebody left a big red apple on her desk for her to find when she came into the classroom, and she smiled and put it into her desk, out of sight. Somebody else left some purple asters, which she put in her drinking glass. After that the presents kept coming. She was the only pretty teacher in the school. She never had to ask us to be quiet or to stop throwing erasers. We would not have dreamed of doing anything that would displease her.

Somebody wormed it out of her when her birthday was. While she was out of the room, the class voted to present her with flowers from the greenhouse. Then they took another vote and sweet peas won. When she saw the florist's box waiting on her desk, she said, "Oh?"

"Look inside," we all said.

Her delicate fingers seemed to take forever to remove the ribbon. In the end, she raised the lid of the box and exclaimed.

"Read the card!" we shouted.

Many Happy Returns to Miss Vera Brown, from the Fifth Grade, it said.

She put her nose in the flowers and said, "Thank you all very, very much," and then turned our minds to the spelling lesson of the day.

After school we escorted her downtown in a body to a special matinee of D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*. We paid for everything.

We meant to have her for our teacher forever. We intended to pass right up through the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and on to high school taking her with us. But that isn't what happened. One day there was a substitute teacher. We expected our real teacher to be back the next day, but she wasn't. Week after week passed, and the substitute continued to sit at Miss Brown's desk, calling on us to recite and giving out tests and handing them back with grades on them, and we went on acting the way we had when Miss Brown was there because we didn't want her to come back and find we hadn't been nice to the substitute. One Monday morning she cleared her throat and said that Miss Brown was sick and not coming back for the rest of the term.

In the fall we had passed on into the sixth grade, and she was still not back. Benny Irish's mother found out that she was living with an aunt and uncle on a farm a mile or so beyond the edge of town, and told my mother, who told somebody in my hearing. One afternoon after school Benny and I got on our bikes and rode out to see her. At the place where the road turns off to go to the cemetery and the Chautauqua grounds, there was a red barn with a huge circus poster on it, showing the entire inside of the Sells-Floto Circus tent and everything that was going on in the three rings. In the summertime, riding in the backseat of my father's open Chalmers, I used to crane my neck as we passed the turn, hoping to see every last tiger and flying-trapeze artist, but it was never possible. The poster was weather-beaten now, with loose strips of paper hanging down.

It was getting dark as we wheeled our bikes up the lane of the farmhouse where Miss Brown lived.

"You knock," Benny said as we started up the porch.

"No, you do it," I said.

We hadn't thought ahead of what it would be like to see her. We wouldn't have been surprised if she had come to the door herself and thrown up her hands in astonishment when she saw who it was, but instead a much older woman opened the door and said, "What do you want?"

"We came to see Miss Brown," I said.

"We're in her class at school," Benny explained.

I could see that the woman was trying to decide whether she should tell us to go away, but she said, "I'll find out if she wants to see you," and left us standing on the porch for what seemed like a long time. Then she appeared again and said, "You can come in now."

As we followed her through the front parlor I could make out in the dim light that there was an old-fashioned organ like the kind you used to see in country churches, and linoleum on the floor, and stiff uncomfortable chairs, and family portraits behind curved glass in big oval frames.

The room beyond it was lighted by a coal-oil lamp but seemed ever so much darker than the unlighted room we had just passed through. Propped up on pillows on a big double bed was our teacher, but so changed. Her arms were like sticks, and all the life in her seemed concentrated in her eyes, which had dark circles around them and were enormous. She managed a flicker of recognition but I was struck dumb by the fact that she didn't seem glad to see us. She didn't belong to us anymore. She belonged to her illness.

Benny said, "I hope you get well soon."

The angel who watches over little boys who know but they can't say it saw to it that we didn't touch anything, and in a minute we were outside, on our bicycles, riding through the dusk toward the turn in the road and town.

A few weeks later I read in the *Lincoln Evening Courier*, that Miss Vera Brown, who taught the fifth grade at Central School, had died of tuberculosis, aged twenty-three years and seven months.

Sometimes I went with my mother when she put flowers on the graves of my grandparents. The cinder roads wound through the cemetery in ways she understood and I didn't, and I would read the names on the monuments: Brower, Cadwallader, Andrews, Bates, Mitchell. In loving memory of. Infant daughter of. Beloved wife of. The cemetery was so large and so many people were buried there, it would have taken a long time to locate a particular grave if you didn't know where it was already. But I know, the way I sometimes know what is in wrapped packages, that the elderly woman who let us in and who took care of Miss Brown during her last illness went to the cemetery regularly and poured the rancid water out of the tin receptacle that was sunk below the level of the grass at the foot of her grave, and filled it with fresh water from a nearby faucet and arranged the flowers she had brought in such a way as to please the eye of the living and the closed eyes of the dead.



Buffalo Soldiers Remember Trials but Focus on Triumph

By Yamiche Alcindor

WASHINGTON — Joseph Hairston enlisted in the Army in 1940 as an 18-year-old and still remembers the cold stares and disgusted gazes of his white commanding officers.

Hairston, 87, served in the 599th Field Artillery Battalion and became one of the Army's first black commissioned officers. He deployed to Italy in 1944 and, like other black soldiers, ate, slept and trained separately from white soldiers. Even so, Hairston remained in the Army and went on to serve in Korea. He retired after 20 years. "I believe in my country," Hairston said. "As bad as the past has been, there's nowhere else I want to be."

Hairston is a Buffalo soldier, one of thousands of African Americans who served in a segregated U.S. Army during World War II. This past weekend in Silver Spring, Md., Hairston joined dozens of other Buffalo soldiers at the annual reunion hosted by the Washington-based 92nd Infantry Division (Buffalo) Association, founded in 1982 as a means of preserving the division's history.

The 92nd was formed with African American soldiers during World War I and reactivated during World War II. The nickname traces to the one given black soldiers who fought in the 19th-century wars on the western frontier.

Some of the veterans at the Silver Spring reunion slowly walked around the room, canes in hand, greeting their old friends.

Others sat in their wheelchairs, telling stories. The men, some of whom traveled from Ohio, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, are well into their 80s and 90s. An 84-year-old, in this group, ranks as a "youngster."

Time is thinning their ranks. Nearly a decade ago, a teacher told Albert Burke's granddaughter that all the Buffalo soldiers were dead.

The little girl knew better.

"She took me to school with her one day to show her teacher that there were live Buffalo soldiers," Burke, 89, recalled.

As Burke reminisced, his eyes filled with tears. He wonders, when they are all dead, whether anyone

will remember the Buffalo soldiers' sacrifice in the face of discrimination and racism.

Hairston, the officer, and his wife, Anna, lived in Washington for more than 50 years. He sits on the boards of more than a dozen nonprofit organizations and is actively involved in neighborhood issues.

A deeply religious man, he said his faith and the teachings of the Bible help him to put the past behind him.

"Some people want to emphasize how bad it was, but I want to emphasize how good it is now," Hairston said. "I'd rather not concentrate on the horror."

Historians say the nickname of Buffalo soldier was given by the Indians to their African American adversaries because of their curly hair and as a sign of respect for their valor and prowess.

With the members of the Buffalo Division getting older, the association has opened membership to anyone interested in the group's history.

Army Lt. Col. Patricia Tucker of Pittsburgh drove five hours to attend the reunion. While she is not directly affiliated with the men, she said her interest in African American history and the Army pulled her toward the group. "I just fell in love with them," she said.

Howard Fletcher, 84, helped found the association and served as its president for several years. But people like Tucker will have to carry it on.

"Black soldiers have fought in every war that the U.S. has fought," he said. "We earned freedom. We earned our civil rights. If we hadn't fought, there would be an argument not to give us anything. But they can't say that."

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