



The Chesapeake Reader

Riley
A Novel Excerpt

By Yvonne Battle-Felton

Along 20th Street alone there are twenty-one cracks on the sidewalk between Riley's stoop and the corner she isn't allowed to cross anyway. Twenty-one opportunities, each requiring careful consideration over which Riley contemplates whether or not to break her mother's back. Right foot, then left. The first cracks are easy. Riley forgives her mother for making her go to bed early last night; for making her miss her favorite TV show; and for making her eat what Corrine claimed was spaghetti, when everyone knows Corrine can't cook. And so Riley steps easily this hot summer's day, baking slab of concrete to baking slab of concrete, the trinkets on her patent leather shoes clinking softly before resting, patiently waiting as she contemplates her next step.

The thin whine of car horns wafts on breezes from Vine Street, bringing the world that much closer to 20th street where boys on bicycles whiz past Riley. They race up splintered homemade wooden ramps over plastic milk crates, Evil Kneivling through air, muscular legs pumping, bikes sailing, then sliding or tumbling to a stop in front of a growing circle of boys high-fiving one another, sweat stains permanently tattooed under their arms. And the boy, the five minute superstar, basks in the glory such stunts are meant to create: the smile from one of the long legged girls, hopefully



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Lillith, which lasts one full minute or until the next boy races breathlessly by, whichever comes first.

Riley watches the girls with crisp ponytails jumping Double Dutch or single rope, sneakers springing then slapping the pavement with thin legs pumping, breath held between slender ribs, arms swinging like ribbons, hands clapping or snapping or Ms. Mary Macking. These girls wear bright orange or Rainbow Brite pink—colors they won't be caught dead wearing in another two years. More importantly, the girls watch one another. They watch little sisters and brothers, even the stray cats that stretch and leap, one stoop to another, but what they don't watch, or don't appear to watch, is the boys.

Still, as if on cue, as one boy then another sails up rickety ramps on rusted bicycles, all the girls' heads turn at once in the general direction of where they imagine the boy will land and smile to no one in particular. All but Lillith. Lillith twirls mid-jump, the ropes whishing quietly over her, body twisted, slender neck taut, her light brown eyes gazing directly into the eyes of the boy who has risked it all, for her, until she gazes intently into the eyes of the next one.

Still, Riley flirts with destiny. As she remembers her mother siding with Lillith over whose turn it was to dry dishes or Corrine teasing Riley over her inherently thick thighs—from her father's side—her poor mother's fate becomes less certain. And finally, by crack fifteen, it relies on excuses and explanations, on the rationalizations of a nine year old.



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By crack nineteen, if she squints, Riley can almost make out the glimmering white letters on the green street sign, 21st Street, where at the corner store you can get an iced cold can of coke, two sticky green Now and Laters, and a bag of chips, maybe even the Gold Nips Riley liked, without ever spending a dime. All you had to do, according to the neighborhood girls and a few of the boys, was let Mr. Jameson stand a little too close and brush his hairy arms on your naked neck, maybe let him blow hot air along the fresh scrubbed skin beneath your chin. For an iced cold coke on a day like today, Riley just might risk being nice to Mr. Jameson, especially if it means the Gold Nips.

Without realizing it, she has stepped over the twenty-first crack and planted herself solidly on the curb. Across the street the stoops are littered with clear bottles and brown bags, worn sneakers drape telephone lines, the walls of abandoned row homes are covered with faded graffiti. Riley is tempted by all of this. Somehow Riley's grandmother is to blame. Simone had warned her granddaughters, had warned her daughter, too, for all the good that did, about winos and dope fiends hiding in alleys, waiting for little girls and making them do, God knows what, or selling them, as slaves maybe, to faraway lands. Riley wasn't sure she believed her though; after all, this was the same woman who had told her about Santa Claus. Still, she isn't sure.

"Riley!" Corrine trills. Riley's mother had spent years cultivating what she had hoped was that superior tone that told the neighbors, 'I am an educated woman of



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the 80's, I talk to my children,' but translated to her children as 'get your ass over here now!' It did.


And so Riley shudders, the way she imagines good girls do, turns and runs home. Right foot, then left, right, then left, she steps squarely, purposely, on twenty-one cracks.

An hour later Riley stands primly perched on the red concrete stoop in front of her home and slowly twirls a complete circle before putting both hands on her fleshy hips.

"I said, I can't play with y'all right now," she repeats, glowering at the three girls gathered around the bottom of her steps. "I'm all dressed up."

And she is. Riley doesn't want any scuffs on her tight, crimson patent leather shoes, or any stains on her soft red and white striped summer dress with strawberry shaped pockets and the big papery, strawberry shaped bow along the back. Riley's father is on his way to pick her and her sister up for the weekend. Never mind that he had missed the last weekend and the one before. This time he'd be there. Riley wants everything to be perfect when he arrives. This time she'll be waiting outside so her mother can't ask him for the money he was supposed to give her, and so she can't get mad when what he gives her isn't enough. If Riley waits on the stoop, her father won't have to get out of the car at all. If Lilith stays near the house too, they can leave before Corrine knows the girls are gone.

Lilith and her friends exchange glances, sigh and skip across the street. You know you're too old to be skipping, Riley wants to say. But Lilith never invited her



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to play with her friends, so although Riley knows she won't ever invite her again, Riley doesn't want to make her mad, just in case. And it's so easy to make Lilith mad these days. Like today, Lilith refused to talk to her own father on the phone. She stood arms tightly crossed before her slender frame, dark eyes staring blankly through the phone when their father asked what she wanted for dinner. And when he asked if his baby girl had missed him, she let the phone slip between her delicate fingers, leaving it to dangle inches from the floor. Her answer had been footsteps echoing softly across the worn carpet. Their mother should have made her answer him, Riley thought. She should have slapped Lilith across the face for sucking her teeth and rolling her eyes at their father, even if he couldn't see her do it. But Corrine shook her head slowly, her gold earrings gently swaying, and gave the phone to Riley. Lilith hadn't changed her clothes or brushed her hair; she wasn't even trying to keep her everyday clothes clean. Riley would stay clean and crisp, beautifully preserved until their father arrived, and he hadn't even asked if she missed him.

Since she couldn't play hopscotch with Lilith and her friends, or jacks with the girls up the street, Riley entertains herself by tilting her head slightly and then sharply as the ribbons her mother tied around her lone ponytail gently kiss the back of her neck. She practices rolling her eyes and her neck in one fluid motion the way Lilith did. She has mastered the look of irritation: eyes tightly closed; lips puckered and bitter; one corner of her mouth slightly raised. This was the same look she reserved for indignation, impatience and indulgence. Lilith made it look effortless.



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Riley looks across the street. No sign of Lilith. The other girls are still there unraveling thin ropes for Double Dutch, but Lilith slipped away while Riley's eyes were closed. From her perch, Riley searches the identical concrete stoops of the houses on either side of hers, each immaculate stoop adorned with a large plant, dead or alive, in an oversized ceramic flowerpot, leaving barely enough room for the one or two plastic chairs guarding either side of the porch door. Each door leads to an identical brick row house, tightly packed one next to the other, each one indistinguishable from the next. But Riley knows well enough what goes on behind each door. Kids talk.

Sliding the soles of her shoes along the pavement, Riley strolls to the curb, peering up and down the other side of the street. Still no Lilith. Her underarms begin to tingle. If Lilith isn't around when their father pulls up, he'll have to go looking for her. Corrine will come out of the house yelling words Riley's afraid to use in front of her mother. Their father will ignore Corrine, smiling past her into the rooms of their neighbors, smiling at the women watching silently through slanted shades. Then Corrine will say something, something that will make her ex-husband look at her and slowly raise his fists as if to strike her. Her father will look larger then, until he turns slowly into the faces of the men, the fathers and the husbands, who wait in stained work clothes, waiting to see how far he will go. Until he slowly, apologetically, lowers his fists—just like last time.

So, panic seeps through Riley's skin as she considers where Lilith is. She could be hiding just behind the wooden fence across the street, but so many of the



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panels are missing that Riley should catch a glimpse of a shoulder, a slice of thigh as she slides a bit closer to the edge. That boy. Maybe Lilith had darted around the corner to let that curly haired, hazel-eyed boy touch her again, and because Riley had threatened to tell on her the last time, she had slipped away while Riley's eyes were closed. Maybe that's why Lilith's friends were over there pretending not to feel Riley's eyes on their bony little backs. That's what worries Riley. If Lilith was letting that pretty boy touch her all over, Tiffany and Lauren wouldn't go through so much trouble turning their heads to watch old men in new cars drive down 20th street.

Riley thinks about telling her mother. But she can't mention that boy without confessing what she already knows, and she'll get in trouble along with Lilith for not telling in the first place. Instead, she gives the girls a final glare before turning to search for her big sister.

Riley paces the length of the block, Elm-lined corner to Elm-lined corner, retracing her steps. The tingle beneath her arms spreads. Sticky with perspiration, she counts the steps to and from her house, to and from one corner, to and from the next. Her heart drops as she recognizes Lilith's boyfriend walking towards Tiffany and Lauren; he pauses and without slowing his stride, he shrugs, glances at Riley and continues walking a little faster. Damn. Daddy will be here any minute, Riley thinks.

I'm telling, she decides. There's no other choice but to walk in to the foyer and say Corrine, because that's what she always called her mother when she imagined these conversations, Corrine, something just ain't right. Filling her lungs with the last of the fresh air she expects to breathe for at least a week, Riley turns to face her



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mother. Still, ten minutes later Riley sits, right foot snug beneath her left thigh, collapsed on the steps pressing her pretty, paper bow to the concrete, as she composes the rest of her sentence. By the time Tiffany and Lauren finish practicing turning Double Dutch, she knows what she has to say. Riley is still picturing her mother's response (which isn't good) when Lilith ambles up the block cradling four cans in the swell of her blouse.

Silently, Lilith hands Riley a wet can of grape soda, setting two cans at the bottom of the steps, and clutching the last one between her thin, trembling hands. Riley watches her rub the sweat from the can, up then down, up then down, with minute, even strokes.

"Where'd you get these?" Neither of the girls had money.

Instead of answering, Lilith pops open her can and looking into her sister's eyes; she tips it on its end. Lilith tilts her head slightly to watch the liquid sizzle to the pavement. She stands rooted to the concrete, mesmerized by the pools of purple collecting between the cracks. Riley watches Tiffany and Lauren steal glances at the unopened cans; she watches as they fold their jump ropes and pack up their memoires. Sweat trickles down Riley's spine as, flickering their tongues over cracked lips, Lilith's friends refuse to look at Lilith. So, that's how it's gonna be, Riley thinks, cracking her knuckles.

"Leave em be," Lilith says, knowing Riley well enough to know she can't take on both girls in a fair fight. That's just another way we're different, Riley thinks, reading Lilith's hesitation, recognizing her doubts. Riley doesn't plan to fight fair.



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Instead of running across the street, she pretends to be content with rolling the empty can back and forth between her once shiny shoes. Riley's stomach bubbles; she has no taste for patience.

“Riley, he isn't coming, is he?” Lilith asks as the gush of deep purple lulls to a pale stream. Riley stands on the bottom of her red concrete steps, one hand anchored within Lilith's, as both girls watch a line of ants follow the trail of grape soda now carefully sliding one drop at a time from the crumpled can.

With a sigh, Riley gathers a soda can in each chubby fist. She stands, thick legs glued to the sidewalk, and eyes boring through Tiffany and Lauren; she shakes the cans until her arms ache. She shakes them hard and fast, like her uncle shakes cheap bottles of champagne. She grips the cans tightly, imagining they are the sweaty necks of sweet little girls and of the men who like them.

“No,” she whispers, mindless of the foam bursting as she snaps the tabs, one after the other, as indifferent to the bubbling white spray as she is to Tiffany and Lauren's pursed lips. Finally, as tiny pale splashes of purple stain the rims of her white socks, she continues, “You need to be more careful of the company you keep.” She doesn't say if she means Tiffany and Lauren, the fast boy, Mr. Jameson, her father, or all of them. She knows by the slope of Lilith's shoulders that she doesn't have to.