



THE GOLDEN IMAGE

13 Stories from the Citizens of Sheridan Falls

PRIME POSITION

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Sheridan Falls, home to at least 100,000 people and a tourist getaway. It has two main attractions that bring in thousands of people each year. We have pristine beaches that are white and the sand is very smooth. There are shells that have been finely grinded with the sand and reflect the sun giving the beach a radiant look.

The biggest beach, Glasgow Beach and Park, is actually a resort area. Several hotels and resorts dot the landscape on the two-mile long ocean front property. In spite of the hotels area, there are plenty of public spaces for visitors. Many come to surf, scuba dive, motor boat, play water sports, swim, and horseback through the water. There was talk to allow a cruise line to buy a piece of the beach so they could dock in summer and spring. The city council denied this but things could change in the future.

There are some parts of the Sheridan Falls coastline where tourists won't go. Companies use those areas for shipping and delivery. Sheridan Falls handle a variety of seafood and electronics trade for U.S. companies delivering goods to the region.

The other tourist attraction is the falls in the highland areas of the city. It's technically within city limits but still far away. There's one main waterfall where the city derives a part of its name. It's roughly a seventy-seven foot tall single drop waterfall. The city engineers were able to build a walkway to go around this fall so people could get within ten feet of the falling water. Tourists love to get that close to the falls and reach out to touch nature's falling stream. The engineers were smart and put up strong guardrails so no one would fall over while attempting this stunt. Many residents, like me, take the waterfalls for granted. It's beautiful but I still prefer the beaches.

I have other things on my mind. It's the start of my last year in high school, and I'm thrilled. Last school season my classmates voted me senior class president. That is an honor, but what energizes me is the desire to do something great. Already I have completed some college classes and plan on taking more. Architecture is tough, so it's a good idea to get a head start on the basic courses. I'm glad Sheridan State offer classes at both city high schools.

I'm proud at being a student of Brent High's senior class. There were opportunities to go to a private school but that's not my style. My friends are here, I can take college courses, good-looking girls, and they voted me class president. Takashi Kaneko, class president does sound nice, and looks great on college applications.

"Takashi," someone yells. I snap out of my daydream and look around the basketball court. "You still playing," Donn asks.

Its lunchtime and playing basketball is a good way to start the school year. Donn is a member of the senior council as well. He's the class treasure and avid basketball player. Like me, he wants to use the council as filler for his college application. He's good at basketball, but not so great that he can get any scholarship he wants. Doing other things will show that he's balanced, intelligent, and athletic.

"Yeah," I respond. Donn bounces me the ball and gets into position for the three-on-three game. Donn, with another guy on the cabinet, as well as me is going against my best friend, Seth and a couple juniors. Seth and I have known each other for years. Even before, we came to Brent together.

Seth guards me as soon as I dribble the ball. It's great playing against your friend even though he's a better player and knows it. I can shoot the three so at least I'm not worthless. Plus, I have Donn on my team. All I have to do is get him the ball and get out the way.

Our teams play for a while. It's back and forth but Donn is clearly helping our senior cabinet threesome. I knock in a long-range shot from time to time, but Donn's athletic moves are no match for Seth and his teammates. We take a break with our team up by five. The lunch period is going to end in 15 minutes and we get some water to cool down. During our break, a girl strolls up in our direction covered in mud.

The six of us keep talking assuming she's going to walk by and go inside the school. I've seen her before in one of the special classes for people who have various learning disabilities. Our school and Wedgewood, the other high school, have classrooms for them. Years ago, they use to put everyone with special learning in one of the old elementary schools. People complained, so they split the group and put them between the two high schools.

Donn is in the middle of talking about a high score he got on a war game he was playing when the girl walks right up to our group. She looks right at me, caked in mud. It covered her hair, clothes, and shoes. Various cuts littered her face, and bruises were on parts of her arms. There is silence, but she ends the break.

“Hi, my name is Claudeen,” she says. “Do I meet your satisfaction?”

“Excuse me,” I respond. Some of the guys chuckle so I assume this is a joke.

“Do I meet your satisfaction,” she asks louder. Her movements is jerky and she stares into my eyes pleading for what I assume was acceptance.

“I heard you Claudeen,” I respond. “But why are you covered in mud? Why would that satisfy me?”

“I don’t want to hurt anymore,” Claudeen starts, “I’m tired of being embarrassed and punched.”

“Go on now,” Donn orders. “Takashi doesn’t have time for this.”

“Wait Donn,” I say. Claudeen shifts her attention from Donn to me. I can see the fear in her eyes and looks at me for help. “I don’t know you,” I begin, “why would I hurt you?”

“Every cabinet does it,” Claudeen responds.

“Say, what,” I ask.

Ms. Hampton come over and walks up to Claudeen. “Let’s get you cleaned up,” Ms. Hampton says. Claudeen looks into the teacher’s eyes and follows. She turns her head and stares at me. I don’t know what to do, but she is seeking a resolution. I give her the thumbs up. She smiles and follows Ms. Hampton with ease.

“What was that about,” Seth asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. I have some suspicions on some rumors that some of the students bullied the slower classes. No one openly complained and for the most part they where just rumors. It was nothing like the situations I heard over at Wedgewood. Apparently, they have a small gang problem. I’m glad we aren’t like them.

Seth and I talk about the situation after the lunch break. We knew it had to be bad for Claudeen to show up covered in mud and self mutilated. I didn’t know what had went on, but it had to of been horrible. I’m glad Ms. Hampton came over. She’s a young teacher, but very wise. The humorous thing is how many of my fellow seniors try to ask her to the homecoming dance in six weeks. They assume that because they where 18, dating a teacher was legal. They couldn’t be further from the truth, but I can’t blame them for trying.

After school, Seth and I look up some information on the bullying. We want to see if anyone wrote about abuses or bullying special needs students. There is small stuff but nothing concrete. We even try talking to people on Twitter, Facebook, and various other sites. Nothing came up. Finally, it hit me. I am going to have to go to the source that brought this to my attention. Claudeen.

The next day at school, I make it a point to meet with Claudeen. While in homeroom, I realize that I don't know her schedule and assume that it will not line up with mine. This will make it hard to meet up with her by chance in the hallways or study hall. Because of this, I decide to meet with her during lunch. At least I know that we have that in common.

Claudeen is with some of her classmates near the edge of the soccer field. Donn and Seth wants me to play basketball but I decline after telling them what I plan on doing. Seth joins me and we walk towards Claudeen.

Being class president is serious. I couldn’t stand myself if I at least didn’t learn what was going on and how to help others within my power. Claudeen sees me walk in her direction. A few of her friends run off, but the others stay at her behest. She gives them the thumbs up like I gave, assuring them that I wasn’t going to hurt anybody. Some of the guys look cautious which is funny because they are all bigger then me. Maybe they think that because I represent the cabinet, trouble is sure to come.

“Claudeen,” I call out. She smiles, with a half crook in her face and skip towards me.

“You gave the thumbs up,” she says. “You were satisfied?”

“Yes,” I respond. “Very much so.”

Many of her friends smile and giggle. They are happy at my response. I guess Claudeen served as a sacrificial lamb for the group so no one else would get injured or embarrassed. She has a few scratches on her face and I’m sure the bruises will heal. It’s impressive that she did this for her classmates.

“I have some questions, you don’t mind do you,” I ask.

Claudeen looks at her friends then at me. “No,” she responds hesitantly. Many of them start to leave but I put my hands up.

“You don’t have to go,” I say. Then I return my attention to Claudeen. “You’re safe.”

She smiles and says, “Okay, what’s your question.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since the beginning,” Claudeen responds.

“When you got here,” Seth asks. The group turn their attention to him and then at me. His voice is ripe with anger that frightens some of them. Seth probably seems like he was mad at them, but in reality his rage was against whomever started this mess.

“No, I’m a junior. It was here way before me.”

“You said the cabinet, have they done this?”

Claudeen is nervous. Her fingers fidget as she looks around for comfort. I can hear her gulp. “It’s safe,” Claudeen asks.

“Yes.”

Claudeen pause and blows out a long sigh. “Yes,” she responds. “Each year, the senior leaders secretly embarrass and hurt us.”

That hit my heart like a stone in water. It wasn’t just regular students being bullies but the leaders of the school. They where never suppose to hurt classmates. Here I am judging Wedgewood and my own school has a bullying problem.

“How long,” I ask. Then it dawns on me, I technically already asked that question.

“Since the beginning,” she answers.

“Beginning?” It hits me. This started once they integrated the schools with the special education students. “Why?”

“Enunciation, I think.”

“Initiation,” I help. Claudeen nods.

“Each year, we earn our right to be here.”

“I’m sorry,” I say while massaging my temples. Seth shakes his head in disbelief. No one has the right to do this.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Claudeen says with a smile, “You accepted my humiliation.”

“You shouldn’t have to do that,” I respond. “As long as I can help it, this will stop.”

The school bell rung. Seth and I walk to the doors while Claudeen and classmates ran to the building. They probably feel better but I am a mess. The thought that they have to earn their way into being a student at Brent was ludicrous. I wasn’t sure if the president of the senior class initiates this behavior but it was going to stop with me.

The next day Donn wants to speak with me at lunch. I assume it was about some of the issues on the senior cabinet. We didn’t have much in plans, but our biggest issue is the Homecoming dance. We worked on the matter during the summer with the other cabinet members. Donn, being the treasure, knew how much money we had to help the school. He has ideas for fundraisers we can do to raise more.

We meet on the side of the school leaning against the wall. A few freshman girls walk by and wave. We do our custom head nod and then waited for them to leave.

“Heard you spoke with the retarded girl,” Donn says.

“Claudeen,” I correct. “And you shouldn’t call her retarded.”

“I know, I’m just playing,” he says.

“She told me some stuff. Crazy, unbelievable stuff.”

Donn says, “I’m sure she stretched the truth a little, everyone does.”

I pause for a moment and stare at Donn. This isn’t a shock to him. I’m not sure what he knows but his behavior seems like its okay to abuse others.

“Donn, I don’t think you know what’s going on. She said previous senior classes privately embarrassed and hurt them so they could earn their way into school.”

“Yeah,” Donn responds. His response is flat. He knows. It’s not a shock to him.

“That’s all you can say. Yeah. Did you know about this?”

“You didn’t,” Donn responds.

“No,” I answer. I shake my head and am speechless. The words are trying to come out to convince him that hurting others is wrong. You can’t treat people like this. This is a school not a private organization.

“You can’t stop this. I already have ideas,” Donn says.

“Don’t care,” I respond.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t care what your ideas are,” I say. “It ends with us.”

Donn is visibly upset. He crosses his arms and nostrils flare open. He’s trying to intimidate me with his size and muscular body. He knows I can’t fight. That doesn’t matter. The behavior of treating any student at Brent as second-class citizens is going to end with me.

“You’re spitting in the face of tradition. We didn’t start it Takashi, but it’s in our best interest to continue.”

“I vomit in the face of tradition. It ends with us Donn. Period.”

Donn can see that he is not going to change my mind. He walks away and head towards the courts. I don’t want to see him out on the courts and walk inside the school. My mind is in shock at his blatant disregard for others people's well-being.

Throughout the rest of the week, I spoke with some people, trusted friends, on the subject. Most of them had never heard about mistreating some of our classmates. Then again, none of them is close to the mentally or physically challenged. They like me were surprised.

Many of my friends gave various and good suggestions. Mona Wilkerson told me to continue standing up for them. She didn’t know that it was going on, but that a strong leader should stare adversity in the face and overcome that situation. Marcy, one of the relatives from the founder of Sheridan Falls, told me to do what was right. “Tradition is stupid,” she said. I knew she would say that. She has a nerdy-goth mix to her style. Seth heard Claudeen’s statement and was on my side.

At the end of the week, the senior cabinet has a brief meeting. It was made of me, the VP, secretary, treasure, plus a few council members. In total, we have seven. Donn and I never joke during the meeting causing everyone to feel uncomfortable. They know our friendship so the others can tell something is wrong.

After the meeting, one of the council members, Jason Templeton, wants to talk. We go a few doors down from the room near the physics class.

“Have a minute,” Jason asks.

“Quick one.”

“What’s the matter?”

Jason is another one of the family members from the founding families of Sheridan Falls. The Templetons don’t get as much credit as the Sheridans but they where here together. Of course, this was more then two hundred years ago, so it’s not as if it was his grandfather or something. I do know Jason and Marcy are close friends. Not sure if it’s more then that.

“Do you know,” I ask him.

“Know what?”

“That the mentally challenged students are being abused.”

Jason squints and cocks his head to the side. He doesn’t know. “What,” he asks.

I explain to him what Claudeen said to me. Most of the dialogue is in whispers. Can’t let other people hear our conversation. Jason is surprised to hear that Donn and other cabinet members knew about the abuse.

“Speak with Ms. Hampton,” Jason suggests. “She’s our advisor.”

I agree and meet with Ms. Hampton after school. It’s Friday so she doesn’t mind making a little time. I drive to school, staying a little longer isn’t a problem. We meet in her overly decorated and full of color classroom.

“Something on your mind Takashi,” Ms. Hampton asks. Her voice is high and almost piercing. It’s probably why new seniors assume she is close to our age.

“Yes,” I respond. From there I tell her some of the troubling information I learned. Unlike with Jason, I didn’t give her names of people who I believed would want to continue the tradition. Although that could help the situation, I never thought it was good to be a tattletale.

Ms. Hampton thought about my dilemma and sighs. She’s thinking about her advice. I’m sure when I walk in she assumes the issue would be on the homecoming dance or planting daises by the trees.

“It’s interesting,” Ms. Hampton starts.

“What is?”

“That us and Wedgewood is going through a similar but different situation.”

“They’re bullying situation is out of control,” I respond.

“And this isn’t?”

I thought about what she said and nod. “Touché.”

“What’s really weird is that at Wedgewood some young guy is stirring up a little trouble and asking about the bullies. He wants to put an end to the problem.”

“How do you know this?”

“Teacher stuff,” Ms. Hampton responds. “We talk. The thing about it is that you’re in a similar but even more complicated situation. This is because people don’t know we have a problem. How do you punish an invisible problem?”

“Thanks Ms. Hampton,” I say.

“That’s it? You don’t want to hear my idea. I have an analogy on being an adventurer and taking chances that can help.”

“Maybe later,” I respond. “But you gave me a good idea.”

That weekend I talk with Seth. We hash out a plan that will help Claudeen and her friends. Ms. Hampton is right. We have to reveal to people what is going on without being tattletales. Unlike Wedgewood where everyone knows about the bullying situation, we have to reveal that there’s a problem. The best place to do this is at Homecoming.

I wait for the moment when Claudeen is with her classmates in the cafeteria. It’s raining and most of the peoples stay inside to eat and play card games. Rumors spread on how Wedgewood ended their bullying situation. It wasn’t a secret so it was easier for them to deal with the problem directly. The young guy pulled it off and was able to help his school. Now it’s my turn.

At the lunch table, I talk with my friends and move to various tables in the cafeteria. I do this on purpose to show everyone that all people are equal. We’re all Brent High Unicorns and none of us is better or worst than any other.

Finally, the time came for me to start the plan.

“Hey Claudeen,” I say.

“Hello,” she responds.

“Got a date for Homecoming?”

“No, I never do,” she says. She shrugs her shoulders and plays with her long hair. “But it’s okay...”

“Wanna’ be mine?”

There is silence at the table and the ones next to us. Many people hear my request but can’t believe it. Why would the senior class president ask someone from the special education class to homecoming? There are plenty of girls interested in me. Maybe not plenty but quite a few, I think.

“You’re joking,” she asks.

“No, no I’m not.”

“Uh...”

“How about I give you some time,” I suggest.

“No, I mean yes. I mean no you don’t have to give me time, but yes, I would go.”

I smile, thank her, and tell her that I have some business to attend. She is happy and talks with her friends.

To most people I was insane but Seth knows the plan. We had an idea and hope it will help. Claudeen has already been a physical sacrificial lamb for her friends but after homecoming, she'll never have to self-humiliate while at Brent.

The days in between asking Claudeen to the Homecoming dance, many people ask what I was thinking. I told them she was sweet and cute. Claudeen would sometimes have a blank look with her eyes wide open and a crooked grin. Her face structure is perfectly even on both sides and the hair flows well past the middle of her back. Besides, I wanted to hang out with her.

In the hall after chemistry, Donn pulls me to the side. We didn't speak much since the argument on the side of the school. Both of us have study hall at the same time and walk in that direction.

"What are you doing," Donn ask.

"Going to study hall, like you."

"Not that. You and Claudeen?"

"We're not a couple, just going to homecoming together."

We keep walking but at a slower pace so the conversation wouldn't be in study hall.

"You think this is going to save her or those kids in the special-ed class," Donn says with his voice full of hate.

"If you spent time with them, you wouldn't see them like that."

"If you think, that going on a date with her will protect them, you're wrong. Greg likes the plans I got. You can't stop us."

Greg is the Vice-President of the senior class. I knew he had something to do with the situation. He's probably the main leader with Donn helping him. We stop in front of the study hall room. I stare at the door and then down the hall. A little ways and to the left are the special education classes for the junior and seniors.

"Yes I will. And I will do everything I can, to put an end to you, Greg, and anyone else who abuses their power."

We didn't have anything to say after that. We went into the class our separate ways. Donn disappoints me. I can't believe he feels like it's his right to hurt others.

Homecoming takes place in the school gym. The entire room is full of gold and white, the school colors. We were happy because our football team won the night before which brought more excitement to the dance.

The king and queen of the dance are the starting Quarterback and Head Cheerleader. No shock, no surprises. Sometimes, you get the most random of people to win but not now. That was fine and didn't care about that. My goal was to expose the senior cabinet for trying to hurt their own classmates.

During the dance, I have a feeling that the members of the group will come after Claudeen. She already tossed mud on herself at the beginning of the school year. To the student body it wouldn't be a surprise if she were caught doing something else that was strange. No one would suspect someone from the cabinet to be a part.

Claudeen tells me she has to use the restroom after a Spandau Ballet's hit song ends. I'm cool with that and look at Seth. We knew that we have to follow her because the cabinet might make their move. One part of the plan was for me to follow from a distance so their plan can start but she wouldn't get hurt. I didn't want them to stop what they were doing so Seth and I can catch them in the act.

When Claudeen left, I wait for a few seconds and leave after but the secretary of the senior cabinet, Joy, stops me. She wants a dance but I refuse. She is persistent and I can tell something is wrong. I lead Joy to the dance floor and spin her quickly. She smiles and then stops to see that I'm already heading off the dance floor and into the hallway.

Claudeen is down the hall and turns the corner when a few members of the cabinet follow her. I don't see Seth but assume that he is in position as well. Joy might follow me, so I decide to take a different route and go upstairs. After that, I make my way down the hall and walk down the stairs where I know Claudeen will be.

Claudeen steps out the restroom to see Donn, Greg, and a few members of the senior cabinet. She recognizes them and hunches her shoulders.

"Takashi said that it was done. That I had fulfilled my commitment," Claudeen nervously says.

"No," Donn responds. "That was self-inflicted. It can't be like that."

"Besides," Greg starts, "You now have to be an example to Takashi for going against us."

"I don't want to be hurt. Please don't," Claudeen pleases.

“Get the urine,” Greg calls over to one of the cabinet members. “Soak her down and punch her ribs. They already think she’s crazy for the mud stunt and scratching herself.”

“Leave her alone,” I command.

I heard some of what they said and ran down the hall. They plan on embarrassing Claudeen by splashing her with urine. Disgusting. I can't believe they all brought their own to splash Claudeen. That's awful. Then to punch her in the ribs, that's criminal.

“Takashi,” Donn starts, “this Captain American stunt has gone on long enough. Grab a bottle and show yourself to be the leader that you are.”

“I am,” I respond. I stand in front of Claudeen to protect her from liquid human waste.

“It's tradition,” Joy says.

“One that should be broken.”

“Since this school start letting misfits in, every senior class has put them in their place,” Greg says.

“I made a promise to Claudeen and her classmates. This stops with us.”

“You leave us no choice but to include you with this,” Donn says and wave his free hand in Claudeen's direction. He is furious and has a bottle of urine ready to go.

“So be it,” I respond.

Right before Donn was going to squeeze, there is a sound of heels coming down the hall. “Stop right there,” a high-pitched voice says. Ms. Hampton is running down the hall. Seth comes from around the corner holding a camera. He taped the entire conversation and had time to tell Ms. Hampton. It was perfect. The group admitted to past issues and their plans to harm current students.

“Put the bottles down now,” Ms. Hampton orders. When she is authoritative, some of that squeakiness goes away.

The same issue, bullying, stops at Brent High as it did in Wedgwood. The methods are different but both are effective. The administrators replace most of the senior class cabinet due to their actions on tape at trying to harm Claudeen and myself. Many of the senior class leadership, who where not on tape, got their positions elevated, like Jason.

What's great is that people at school didn't see me as a nark. My classmates respect me for standing up to people and revealing a secret that has permeated the school for decades. Of course, previous senior classes denied their involvement of such actions but the students they affected say otherwise.

A few days after homecoming, I'm able to speak with Claudeen alone during lunch. There is a nagging feeling that I have done something wrong while trying to do something right. I have to apologize.

“Sorry Claudeen for using you,” I say.

“You didn't use me,” she responds. Claudeen doesn't see how I used her as a part of my plan to help the special education youth. I knew that by asking her out, Claudeen would make a perfect target and easier for me to reveal the cabinet's true purpose. It worked, but had I been late Claudeen would be soaked in urine and her ribs bruised.

“Yeah, I did,” I say. I explain to her what happened as well as Seth and mine plan. The truth is I did like spending time with her as a friend. She's a great person who has a wonderful heart but I'm not trying to be romantically involved. After I said my spill, she responds.

“You saved me,” she says. “I don't care how it happened, but you got it done.”

“True.”

“You where willing to take urine for me. No one has been willing to take the beating or embarrassment that others had for me. No one.”

“I was in prime position to help. I couldn't let that happened,” I say.

Claudeen hugs me and smile. “Thank you.” I hug her back and a little tear streams out of my eye.

Don't be afraid to break tradition, especially if it helps others in their situation and build a relationship with God.