



## ERASER TATTOO

*by Jason Reynolds*

Shay's father climbed up into the driver's seat of a rental truck and slammed the door. Started the engine, cut the emergency blinkers, then honked the horn twice to say goodbye, before pulling off. Moments later, another truck pulled up to the same spot—a replacement. Double-parked, killed the engine, toggled the emergency blinkers, rolled the windows up until there was only a sliver of space for air to slip through.

“What I wanna know is, why you get to give me one, but I can't give you one?” Dante asked, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, his eyes on the street as the people in the new truck—a young man and woman—finally jumped out, lifted the door in the back, studied whatever was inside. Brooklyn was being its usual self. Alive, full of sounds and smells. A car alarm whining down the block. An old lady sitting at a window, blowing cigarette smoke.

The scrape and screech of bus brakes every fifteen minutes. A normal day for Brooklyn. But for Shay and Dante, not a normal day at all.

“Oh, simple. Two reasons. The first is that I can’t risk getting some kind of nasty eraser infection. I’m too cute for that. And the second is that my dad will come back, find you, and kill you for marking me,” Shay replied, stretching her arms over her head, then sitting back down on the stoop beside Dante.

“Kill me? Please. Your pops *loves* me,” Dante shot back confidently. He wiped sweat from his neck, then snatched the pencil he had tucked behind his ear and gave it to Shay. They had been planning this ever since she got the news—ever since she told him she was leaving.

“Um . . . ‘love’ is a strong word. He *likes* you. Sometimes. But he *loves* me.” Shay pushed her finger into her own sternum, like pushing a button to turn her heart on. Or off.

“Not like I do.” Dante let those words slip from his lips effortlessly, like breathing. He’d told Shay that he loved her a long time ago, back when they were five years old and she taught him how to tie his shoes. Before then, he’d just tuck in the laces until they worked their way up the sides, slowly crawling out like worms from wet soil, which would almost always lead to Dante tripping over them, scraping his knees, floor or ground burning holes in his denim. Mrs. Davis, their teacher, would clean the wounds, apply the Band-Aid that would stay put only until school was over. Then Dante would slowly peel it off because Shay always needed to see

it, white where brown used to be, a blood-speckled boo-boo waiting to be blown. Kissed.

. . .

Shay smiled and bumped against Dante before turning to him and softly cupping his jaws with one hand, smushing his cheeks until his lips puckered into a fish face. She pressed her mouth to his for a kiss, and exaggerated the suction noise because she loved how kissing sounded—like something sticking together, then coming unstuck.

“Don’t try to get out of this, Dante,” she scolded, releasing his face. “Gimme your arm.” She grabbed him by the wrist, yanked his arm straight. Then she flipped the pencil point-side up and started rubbing the eraser against his skin.

They’d been sitting on the stoop for a while, watching cars pull out and new cars pull in. Witnessing the neighborhood rearrange itself. They’d been sitting there since Dante helped Shay’s father carry the couch down and load it into the truck. The couch was last and it came after the mattresses, dressers, and boxes with SHOES or BOOKS or SHAY’S MISC. in slanted cursive, scribbled in black marker across the tops. Up and down the steps Dante had gone, back and forth, lifting, carrying, moving, packing, while Shay and her mother continued taping boxes and bagging trash, pausing occasionally for moments of sadness.

Well, Shay’s mother did, at least. She couldn’t stop crying. This had been her home for over twenty years. This small, two-bedroom, third-floor walk-up with good sunlight

and hardwood floors. A show fireplace and ornate molding. Ugly prewar bathroom tiles, like standing on a psychedelic chessboard. This was where Shay took her first steps. Where she took sink baths before pretending her dolls were mermaids in the big tub. Where she scribbled her name on the wall in her room under the window, before slinking into her parents' bed to snuggle. This was where she left trails of stickiness across the floor whenever coming inside with a Popsicle from the ice-cream truck. Where she learned to water her mother's plants. Plants they weren't able to keep because now this space—their space—was gone. Bought out from under them. Empty. All packed into a clunky truck that was already headed south. And since Shay's father left early to get a jump on traffic, it seemed like a good idea to let her mother take a much-needed moment to weep in peace.

Plus, then Shay could have a much-needed moment to eraser-tattoo Dante.

. . .

It felt like nothing at first, to Dante. No different than a finger rubbing.

"Where y'all goin' again?" Dante asked.

"For the *millionth* time, Dante, North Carolina."

"I know that part. I mean, what city?" Dante's skin started to itch a bit.

"Wilmington," Shay said. "Not too far from the water."

Dante didn't say anything. He had never heard of

Wilmington, so he figured it was far. Figured it was a place buses couldn't get to.

"And that's good. I mean, not good that I have to move but that I'm gonna be near water so I can work on my career stuff. Maybe get an internship or something."

"I know, Shay. You wanna save fish and whales and all that."

One of the new tenants, a young white woman, came from the truck and approached the house, her wavy hair whipping in the breeze. She climbed the steps carrying a chair over her head. Dante scooted to the left an inch to let her by.

Shay cocked her head to the side, lifted the pencil for a moment, the air instantly cooling Dante's arm. "A marine biologist. Somebody gotta care for all the stuff underwater that nobody can see. It's a beautiful world down there, full of living things that most folks don't understand."

"Like sharks."

"Like fish that glow in the dark."

Dante ticked his tongue against his teeth. "Fish that glow, Shay? *Really?*" He shook his head. "It don't matter anyway, because when I get rich and famous for building bridges, I'm gonna build one from here to . . ."

"Wilmington."

"Wilmington."

"Or, you could just buy me a plane ticket." Shay chuckled to herself and started in again with the eraser. She was concentrating on the top of the S, a curved back-and-forth motion—a frown.

"I'm gonna buy you a plane ticket. Shoot, I might just buy you a whole plane. *And* this house so we can live in it."

Shay nodded but didn't respond.

"You don't believe me?"

"I do. I just don't want to think about all that." Shay glanced up at him with sadness, a dim shooting star in her eyes. She blinked it away. "Right now, I just want to think about burning my initial into your arm."

"Yeah . . . and, just so you know . . . um . . . it's starting to burn."

"Am I not worth the pain?" Shay tightened her face, cut her eyes at Dante playfully.

"Whatever, Shay. Ain't like you getting *my* initial. So don't give me that."

"Come on, Dante. Let's be real—"

Just then, she was interrupted, not by Dante, or by any sound. Just by the other new tenant—the white man from the truck, cradling a big box, waddling up the stoop. Dante scooted a little more to the left, this time to let the guy pass before he was bowled over.

Shay picked up her thought. "Let's be real," she said. "What if we break up?" And before Dante could interject with all the reasons they wouldn't, and *why would you even think like that*, Shay added, "Not that we will or that I want that, because I don't. But . . . what if we do? Then I gotta have that ugly *D* on my arm forever."

"And I'm gonna have this *S*, so . . ."

"Yeah, but at least you'll be able to tell people it's a snake or something. What am I gonna say?"

"Whatever, Shay." Dante winced as the eraser broke the skin, and the two people trotted past them, back down the steps. Back to the truck.

"Hurt?" Shay asked slyly.

"A little," Dante lied. It hurt like hell. Like someone was trying to strike a match on his flesh. He glanced down at his arm, the eraser rolling back the brown as Shay started on the curve.

"You don't gotta lie. Remember who you talkin' to. The girl who healed your boo-boos when we were kids."

"Uh-huh. Which is why this is so funny—the girl who taught me how to tie my shoes so I wouldn't hurt myself is now . . . hurting me," Dante said, through his teeth.

"Ah, so it *does* hurt."

"It hurts, Shay. It hurts. It didn't at first, but now it does."

"Just don't think about it. Take your mind off of it."

"Um . . . I can't. I mean, what you want me to think about? I can't think of nothing except for the fact that my arm's on fire!" Dante now clinched his jaw and squirmed on the rough clay step. He was doing his best not to quit, to keep his word and go through with this even though he was regretting it more and more each second.

"Okay, okay." Shay stared up at the sky, thinking. "How 'bout . . . You remember when you told me you loved me?"

"The first time?"

"No. We were five. That ain't count. You told *everybody* you loved them back then. You used to kiss your juice boxes after you drank them and tell the straw the same thing." Shay shook her head.

"I did love juice boxes, though." Dante shrugged. "Seriously, straws are *made* for kissing!"

"Whatever." Shay shook her head again. "I'm talking about the first time you told me *forreal*. In the ninth grade."

A smile crept onto Dante's face. A perforated smile, interrupted every few seconds by a grimace. Partly due to the burn from the eraser, partly due to the burn from the memory. "Yeah. It was part of our secret handshake at first. Two claps, a pound, one clap, a dap, then 'I love you' from the both of us."

"Exactly, and we had been friends so long that it was no big deal. Like family. Until one day . . ." She was scrubbing his skin vigorously with the eraser, now coming into the second curve. Almost done.

"Until . . ." Dante's words caught in his throat, overtaken by a painful hiss. "Until one day I hit you with the smooth okey-doke."

"Wasn't no damn okey-doke!" Shay teased. "You dapped me, and we both said 'I love you,' like usual, except you wouldn't let go. And you had this wild look in your eye like my face was lunch or something."

"*Yeahhhhhh*." Dante gave a cocky nod.

"No, Dante. It was scary. But then you said it again. But you were super serious. Like real serious."

"And you remember what you said?" Dante bit his lip to hold in a grunt. Again, part eraser, part memory.

"You always try to bring that up."

"No, Shay, *you* brought this whole thing up! I just wanna make sure before you move to Willington—"

"Wilmington."

"Whatever. I just wanna make sure before you move you get this part of the story straight. So, I told you I loved you, but this time I said it *forreal*. And *you* said . . ."

Shay sighed. "And I said, '*No doubt, homie*.'"

"NO DOUBT, HOMIE!" Dante yelled, showering Shay in fake disappointment. "That's what you said!" Dante dramatically slapped his free hand to his chest. When the "*no doubt, homie*" fiasco first took place, he thought his heart would split in half. But it'd been a long time and he'd gotten over it, for the most part. Now it was just something he loved to tease Shay about.

"Because I didn't think you were serious!"

"But you just said you *knew* I was serious, Shay!"

"Okay. Okay. So, I was scared. Because I knew I loved you too, but it was strange. It's always been me and you, and so for you to, like, try to make it *us*, well, that was a little weird for me at first. But after we walked away from each other, what happened?"

"Well, I was *crushed*."

"No you weren't!"

"Oh, yes I was. But then you ran up behind me and pinched me on the butt, and I knew you loved me too."

"*Yeahhhhhh!*" Shay howled. "And that is what you call game."

Dante shook his head, first at Shay, then at the young man and woman now carrying a mattress toward them. They started up the stoop, but Dante and Shay had no more space to scoot over. They were already up against the railing.

Dante put his free hand up. "Wait, wait, we can just

get off the stoop so y'all can go up," he snapped, his tone somewhere between annoyed and confused. He and Shay stepped down so the couple could step up. "I just don't know why they couldn't say excuse me," Dante grumbled, loud enough for the couple to hear. But they didn't respond. Didn't even flinch. And as Shay and Dante watched the man and woman struggle up the steps inside, they also watched Shay's mother struggle down the steps, eventually stumbling through the front door.

"Wasn't even out of the house before they started moving in all their shit," Shay's mother muttered under her breath. She wiped her eyes, then glanced up, noticing Shay and Dante at the bottom of the stoop. She flashed a sad grin. One of loss and love. One of understanding. "You ready, baby?"

Shay nodded, sighed. Her mother moved slowly, as if giving each foot a moment to mourn each step, and Shay threw her arms around Dante, kissing him on the cheek.

"I love you." It slipped easily from his lips. Like breathing. Like usual.

"No doubt, homie," she replied, her whisper bookended by snuffles. Then she pinched him on the butt.

Dante walked Shay and her mother to the car, opened the passenger-side door. Before Shay got in, she gingerly put the pencil back behind Dante's ear, and he held his arm out so she could see her work. She blew on it, her breath cooling the burn for just a moment.

"Looks good," she said, simply, while slipping down into the seat.

"Not exactly." Dante forced a smile, closed the door, and told Shay to call him when she got there. To Wilmington. A place he'd never heard of, where buses probably didn't go. He watched Shay and her mother pull away, their car easing slowly past the double-parked truck—its emergency blinkers still on—that had left only a sliver of space to get through. And as they turned the corner, vanishing from sight, Dante glanced down at the *S* on his arm again. The burn. White where brown used to be.

He knew the sting wouldn't last forever.  
But the scar would.

# FRESH INK

*EDITED BY LAMAR GILES,  
cofounder of WE NEED DIVERSE BOOKS*

Crown  New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Compilation copyright © 2018 by We Need Diverse Books

Foreword copyright © 2018 by Lamar Giles • “Eraser Tattoo” copyright © 2018 by Jason Reynolds • “Meet Cute” copyright © 2018 by Malinda Lo • “Don’t Pass Me By” copyright © 2018 by Eric Gansworth • “Be Cool for Once” copyright © 2018 by Aminah Mae Safi • “Why I Learned to Cook” copyright © 2018 by Sara Farizan • “A Stranger at the Bochinche” copyright © 2018 by Daniel José Older • “A Boy’s Duty” copyright © 2018 by Sharon G. Flake • “One Voice: A Something In-Between Story” copyright © 2018 by Melissa de la Cruz • “Paladin/Samurai” text copyright © 2018 by Gene Luen Yang, art copyright © 2018 by Thien Pham • “Catch, Pull, Drive” copyright © 2018 by Schuyler Bailar • “Super Human” copyright © 2018 by Nicola Yoon

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Crown Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Crown and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

“Tags” copyright © 2013 by Walter Dean Myers used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers

Visit us on the Web! [GetUnderlined.com](http://GetUnderlined.com)

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools, visit us at [RHTeachersLibrarians.com](http://RHTeachersLibrarians.com)

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Giles, L. R. (Lamar R.), editor.

Title: Fresh ink / edited by Lamar Giles, cofounder of We Need Diverse Books.  
Description: First edition. | New York : Crown, 2018. | Summary: “An anthology featuring award-winning diverse authors about diverse characters. Short stories, a graphic novel, and a one-act play explore such topics as gentrification, acceptance, untimely death, coming out, and poverty, and range in genre from contemporary realistic fiction to adventure and romance”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018006762 (print) | LCCN 2018021487 (ebook) | ISBN 978-1-5247-6630-6 (ebook) | ISBN 978-1-5247-6628-3 (hardback) | ISBN 978-1-5247-6629-0 (glb)

Subjects: LCSH: Short stories, American. | CYAC: Short stories.

Classification: LCC PZ5 (ebook) | LCC PZ5 .F88 2018 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Random House Children’s Books supports the First Amendment and celebrates the right to read.