Girl in the Shadows

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She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose bed is warmed by a hair dryer on a milk crate.

Slipping out from her covers, the oldest girl sits at the window. On mornings like this, she can see all the way across Brooklyn to the Empire State Building, the first New York skyscraper to reach 100 floors. Her gaze always stops at that beautiful stone building, its facade lit with **promise**.

"It makes me feel like there's something going on out there," says the 11-year-old girl, never one for patience. This child of New York is always running before she walks. She likes being first — the first to be born, the first to go to school, the first to make the **honor roll**.

Even her name, Dasani, speaks of a certain hope. She is named after Dasani Water, expensive bottled water that came to Brooklyn just before she was born. It suggested a different, **ambitious** group of newcomers who over the next decade would transform the borough.

Dasani and her family live in the Auburn Family Residence, a **decrepit** city-run shelter for the **homeless**. It is a place where mould creeps up walls and roaches swarm, and small children stand guard for their single mothers outside filthy showers.

It is no place for children. Yet Dasani is among 280 children at the **shelter**. Beyond its walls, she belongs to a vast and invisible group of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York, the highest number since the **Great Depression**, in the most unequal metropolis in America.

Nearly a quarter of Dasani's childhood has unfolded at Auburn, where she shares a 520-square-foot room with her parents and seven siblings. As they begin to wake on this freezing January day, Dasani sets about her chores.