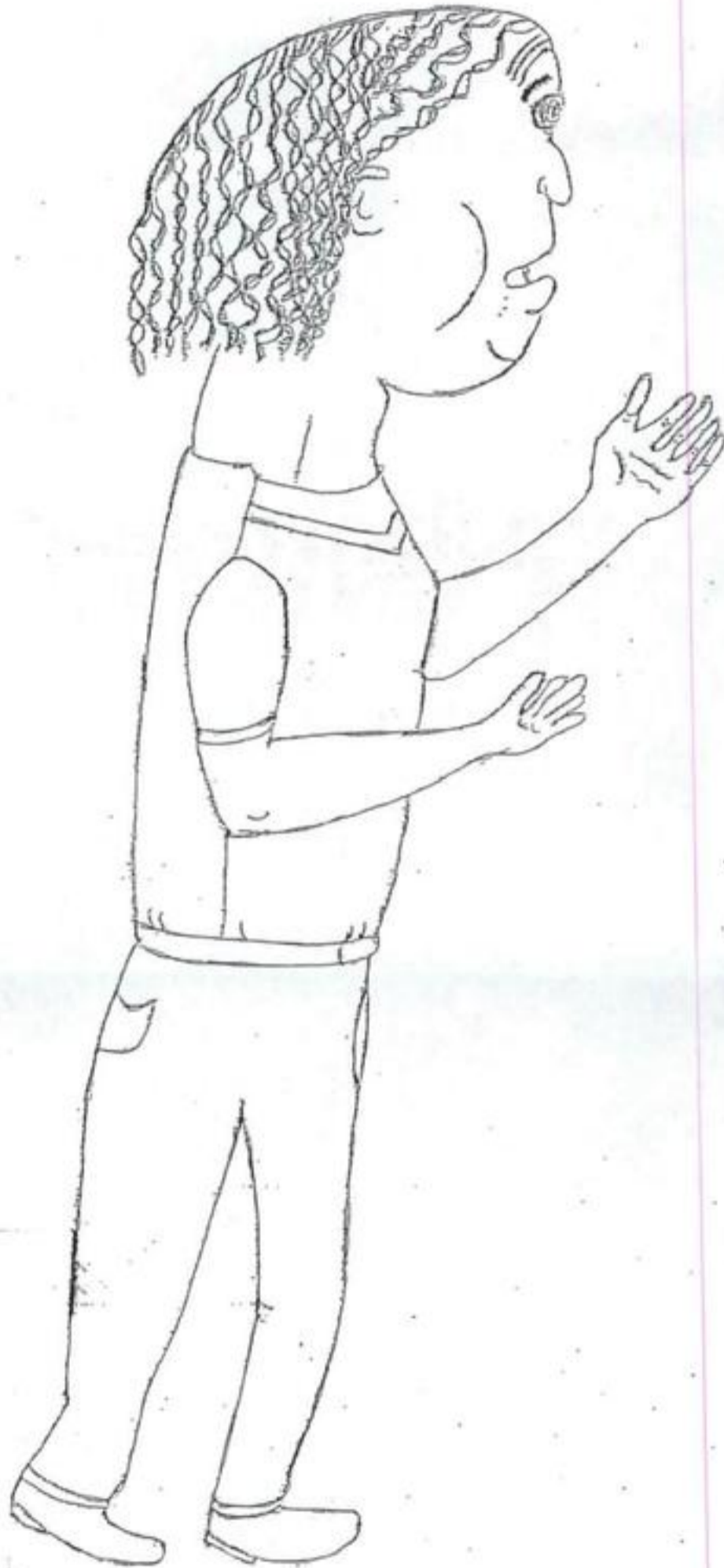


Fitting In



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One boy is brutally beaten while another attempts to straighten out his own troubled life, until he hears what happened to his friend then makes the wrong decision in an attempt to fix things.

Fitting In

Shuttlesworth did a double take and even after that, he still could not believe his eyes. He looked behind him then scanned the rest of the park and playground area. The dark pants and t-shirt he wore concealed him along with the evening of day with the sun nearly down, as he stood hidden behind one of the large trees at the end of the park.

He wanted to scratch the itch that was threatening to brew into a full-scale twitch at the top of his head but knew that if he made so much as a slight move and broke his position, he would definitely be seen by the others, something he was trying hard not to do.

What he really wanted was to get out of there and go tell someone but telling was sure to cause him major problems, maybe even physical harm. Besides, telling was not something he and his friends did.

It was just passed dinner and Shuttlesworth went to the park to meet up with his friends, like they did every evening to discuss this and that but before he could get to the side of the park his friends were on he nearly ran into another group of kids he did not want to run into on a good day.

These kids were sitting on a set of bleachers smoking cigarettes. Normally, Shuttlesworth wouldn't care what those other kids did; they were way more trouble than him and his friends, if you ask Shuttlesworth but what stopped him and made him hide behind that tree in the first place was his friend, Youngme Hogshead, he was sitting amongst those other kids and he was not just sitting there, he was smoking cigarettes right along with them.

Shuttlesworth clamped a hand over his mouth, stifling a sneeze that was beckoning to give him away. His eyes watered as sparkles glittered and raced before his mind's eye. He did not know what to think of Youngme. He turned then leaned his back against the tree before turning back.

He had never seen Youngme like this before. Cigarettes? Wow. He never smoked cigarettes around his own friends before, why this?

"When did he start hanging out with those guys? He's too young to be smoking. Doesn't he know what those things will do to him in the end? He could die of cancer or he could end up getting one of those breathing holes right in his neck. That's no fun. Boy, I hope this is a joke and even if it is, this is a terrible joke."

More importantly, Shuttlesworth does not know what to do. If he walks over there he will more than likely get tossed around or even beat up a little and he doesn't want that but he has to get Youngme away from those guys. They are bad news all around.

"I know they're the ones making Youngme smoke those nasty cigarettes. He can't be doing it on his own. I can't tell on him because he's my friend and I don't want to see him get in any trouble because of me. I know, I'll just talk to Teal and the others and see what they come up with."

As soon as Shuttlesworth eased away from the tree someone called out his name and he immediately froze, knew right away he was busted. He eased his eyes up, looked over and spotted one of the kids Youngme was hanging around, walking toward him.

Shuttlesworth scanned around again, thinking maybe he could make it to the other side of the park where his friends were but when he tried to move, his legs would not cooperate.

"Hey you little buster, 'the hell your lil' young ass doing out here? Did I see you hiding behind that tree?"

"No. I wasn't hiding." Shuttlesworth was nervous, even though the kid was nearly the same age as him.

"Say, you weren't spying on us by any chance, were you? Because I got the feeling you were spying and only snitches do shit like that," said the kid as he came closer and draped an arm around Shuttlesworth's shoulder, making him even more nervous than he already is.

Even though the kid wore a hoodie to cover his head, Shuttlesworth still knew it was one of the other kids that he and his friends were repeatedly warned to stay away from but for some reason, Youngme decided not to listen.

"Why don't you come on over and sit a spell with me and the fella's? 'We just chillin'."

"Nah. I gotta get home." Shuttlesworth quickly glanced across the park to see if he could see Teal and the others but they were a little too far back out of view plus, he did not want to tell this other kid he was meeting his friends because him and his friends would just go over and harass them. They've done it so many times before for no reason.

"Come on kid, what do you mean you gotta go home? The hell with home, and do what? Sit up in your pig pin room all by yourself and do nothing wishing you were hanging out with the fella's? That's for suckers. Don't be a lame. Yo mama probably don't want you in her house anyway, regardless if you in your own room or not. You don't pay no rent so she can kick your ass out anytime she wants."

While Shuttlesworth considered any other options he may have other than hanging out with those bums, the kid suddenly grabbed him by his t-shirt and began pulling him toward the bleachers, as he yelled to his friends.

"Stop. Get off me. Come on man leave me alone. I don't want to go over there. I didn't even do nothing to you."

"Shut yo little ass up and get over here."

Shuttlesworth fell to the grass trying to use his dead weight to keep the kid from dragging him but that only caused him to get kicked. At one point, the kid grabbed Shuttlesworth leg and pulled him a few feet across the grass. "Hey fella's, look what I caught sneaking around in the grass!"

"I wasn't sneaking. Get off me."

When Shuttlesworth struggled to free himself and raced to his feet, the other kid accused Shuttlesworth of shoving him then he slapped Shuttlesworth across his face.

"What up Mark? What you got there homey?" One of the other kids called out as the group approached hoping for trouble. They were all dressed similar; jean, t-shirt, bandana, baseball cap, sneakers.

"I caught this lil' bum ass sucka sneakin' around spying on us like we some idiots and wouldn't notice his lil' ass," said the kid, Mark, then shoved Shuttlesworth back down to the ground.

"I wasn't spying on nobody and I didn't hit you," said Shuttlesworth getting back on his feet again but one of the other kids shoved him right back down. They all laughed, as one of the others kicked Shuttlesworth in the pit of his stomach.