The Shimmershine
Queens

by Camille Yarbrough
illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright

When you are as shy as Angie and live in a tough city neighborhood, feeling good about yourself can be hard sometimes. You need to be strong, like Great Cousin Seatta, who told Angie about the “shimmer-shine feeling”—a feeling of pride in who you are and where you come from. Having a good teacher can help, too, and Angie believes that Ms. Collier, the new drama and dance instructor, will make a real difference. She and Michelle, her best friend, just hope that Ms. Collier stays longer than their last drama teacher.
Wednesday morning, before they went to class, Angie and Michelle walked into the principal's office and sat down on the bench just inside the door. After watching them a while, the secretary asked, "Are you two waiting for the principal?"

"Who?" Angie and Michelle looked at each other. "The principal? No, we waitin for Ms. Collier. Did she come in yet?"

"No," the secretary answered, "I haven't seen her yet."

"Did she quit?" Angie asked.

"I don't know, I don't think so." The secretary looked at them, frowning. "Can someone else help you?"

"No, we just wanna see Ms. Collier." Michelle smiled.

"Who wants to see me?"

Angie and Michelle felt caught. They hadn't intended for Ms. Collier to see them. If she hadn't quit, they thought she would come in through the door near the time clock on the other side of the room, but she came in the door next to where they were sitting, and there she stood, looking at them. They both stood up at the same time. "Good morning, Ms. Collier," they sang out.

"Good morning," she said, smiling. "You want to see me about something?"

"We just wanted to see if you was coming back." Michelle grinned as she and Angie circled Ms. Collier and waved as they hurried past her and out of the door she had come in.

"I told you she was comin back," Michelle bragged as they rushed up the stairs.

"Yeah. Did you see those big boxes she had?"

"Yeah, she got sumpum for us."

"I'm gon tell everybody she got sumpum for us. Everybody but Charlene." Angie laughed.

Later, in the lunchroom, the younger students
who had Ms. Collier's class earlier in the day told Angie and Michelle, "She said it was sumpum for you. For the 5A class. She said we too young."

"It's just for our class?" Angie and Michelle were thrilled.

When lunch was finished and they were back in class, Angie and Michelle spread
the word about Ms. Collier's surprise. "It's just for us," they bragged. And when Ms. Collier came to get them and told them to go on ahead in the hall, the line formed quickly and moved to the top of the stairway with Angie and Michelle leading the way. They stopped the line there and waited for Ms. Collier to come to the front. "Be cool," Michelle whispered. No one moved or broke the line or laughed or screamed. They waited and watched Ms. Collier and she watched them, holding her breath, delighted when one of them asked, "You got sumpum for us?" And especially when Charlene asked, "You like us, Ms. Collier?"

The line descended without a shout or a shove. As they approached Ms. Collier's room, Charlene lost faith. "We ain't gon do nothin special," she warned. "Just wait and see." This time her warning was answered by a chorus of sucked teeth, and rolled eyes and grins from Angie and Michelle. When the door was opened, the double line of children surged forward into the room. They stopped in the center. Their eyes wide, they turned in circles to see the surprise.

"Isn't it grand?" Angie sang the words, spacing them. Lengths of red, brown, yellow, purple, and mixed-color fabrics stretched from the ceiling of the room, crossed in front of the windows, and dropped onto carved Ghanaian stools set in opposite corners. Calabash bowls, feathered fans, brass and iron bracelets, anklets, and earrings covered the table. Long cowrie-shell collars, beaded veils, and elephant tail whisked hung from the top of the blackboard; gold and silver lace, grand Buba gowns tacked in place, were spread out and glittering, hiding the wooden sliding-door cabinet. The
soft gourd and metal music of the African Kalimba flowed from the tape machine hidden beneath the table, and the scent of incense filled the room, changing it into an exciting place of new sounds, scents, colors, and shapes. Ms. Collier had overdressed and in the corner of the room quickly took off her long overgarment, and as the Kalimba music changed to drum rhythms, the children turned to see the golden fabric of a grand Buba gown billow around Ms. Collier as she whirled and stretched and bent, dancing toward them.

The class “Yayed” and clapped and formed a circle around her, some ululating in their delight. Angie couldn’t believe what was happening. The classroom was now like her dreaming room when she got the golden shimmershine feeling. And just as she always danced in her dreaming room, Angie stepped into the dancing circle with Ms. Collier and danced. As she moved, the brilliant colors that draped the room, the young faces, the carved and woven shapes, all blurred around her. Only Ms. Collier was clear, and Angie mirrored her movements, turning, jumping, twisting when she did. The class was stunned and whooped their delight. Even Charlene and her gang were impressed. This was not the scaredy-cat Angie they knew. This was a new Angie and she could dance.

Michelle led the squeals of delight and the applause when the dance ended. Angie looked at Ms. Collier, thinking maybe she had done wrong to dance with her. Ms. Collier saw the question and the fear. “It’s all right, Angie. We’re happy that you danced. You were great. Wasn’t she, class?”

With barely a smile, Angie watched her classmates applaud her; even Charlene, Cheryl, and Pat. Angie felt
strange and she didn't understand the feeling. "You got the shimmershine," Michelle whispered in her ear.

"Yeah." Angie finally smiled. But it wasn't just the shimmershine. Something else was happening.

"All right, class." Ms. Collier waved her hands, directing them to bring their chairs into a semicircle around her. "I have something to ask you. Would you like"—Ms. Collier sat down on her tall stool—"to do a play?"
“Yes,” the class answered. Angie and Michelle exchanged smiles but Angie was still in her shimmering dream world.

“The play,” Ms. Collier explained, “starts in Africa, then moves to America. The beautiful clothes, fabric, and jewelry you see all around come from Africa and are part of what you will wear in the play.”

“Yeah!” the class responded.

“What’s in the box?” Hector stood up and asked.

“You got sumpum else for us?”

“Let us see what you got,” others asked.

Ms. Collier opened the box that she had placed on her desk. From the box she lifted a pair of children’s-size pants, a shirt, and a dress. They were drab and torn and made of coarse cloth.

“What’s that?” Charlene scowled.

“They are not beautiful, are they? Not something you would like to wear.”

“No,” the class moaned, and frowned.

“They all raggedy,” Darrell observed. “They got holes in um.”

Angie stared at the sad clothing. Great Cousin Seatta’s words came to her. “Some didn’t have no shoes and day clothes was raggedy.”

“Ms. Collier”—Angie raised her hand—“I think I know what they are.”

“Good. What do you think they are, Angie?”

Angie’s voice was almost a whisper when she answered, “I think they slave children’s clothes.”

“Ooooh! Slave children’s clothes,” Cheryl moaned. “We got to be slaves in the play?” She sucked her teeth and slouched in her chair.

Hector stood up abruptly.

“No me! I’m not gon do the play if I have to be a slave.”

“You don’t understand,” Angie explained to the class.

“They was like us.”

“Oooh, no, they wasn’t
like us neither. They were Africans."

"Let me tell you the story of the play. Then you tell me if you want to do it. Is that agreeable?"

Angie's "Yes" was louder than the rest as she sat forward in her chair to hear the story. The class became quiet, watching, listening.

"The play is called The Dancing Children of Ghana. The story begins in the seventeen hundreds, in Agogo, an Asante village in Ghana, West Africa. God had blessed the village with many children and, like all children, they loved to learn things and to play games.

Some of the boys worked the bellows to fan a breeze for the Egofoo, the goldsmith, when he cast his metal jewelry and collected wood for the food fires. The girls helped the older women pound yarn, care for the babies, keep the village clean, and make pottery. Most of all, the children loved two things. The first was to dance. Especially a dance called the Adewa. Whenever they heard the drummers playing Adewa, they would run to where the drummers were, where the villagers were gathering, and watch the adults dance. The children imitated their movements. They especially loved the hand movements that meant different things. One movement meant 'Let us unite.' Others meant 'We are strong,' and 'We are the best.' 'We are warriors,' or 'Whatever you do, enemy, we will get our way.' The children imitated the proud style of the dancers, the way the men wrapped their beautiful Kente cloth around them and stamped their feet to show their power over their enemy. The girls squinched their eyes when they danced, the way the adults did, to show disrespect and insult. And they
touched their fists one on top of the other to show 'I have the power.'

"The second thing they loved to do was to draw proverb pictures in the loose soil under the large tree in the center of the village. One child would draw a picture of the two alligators with one stomach. One of the other children would have to guess what it meant."

"What did it mean?" Angie asked.

"It means 'We share life. We must have unity.'" Ms. Collier answered. "Then someone drew the picture of the bird that looks backwards, the Sankofa."

"What that mean?" asked Charlene.

"It means 'You can always correct what went wrong. Return and fetch what is yours.' If you couldn't tell what the proverb pictures meant, you were out of the game.

"Now comes the serious part." Ms. Collier spaced out her words. "One day, during the festival season, when everyone was praying, dancing, singing, and telling and listening to their history, from the surrounding forest European slave traders very quietly sneaked into the village and then attacked the people. With clubs the traders knocked them out. With long firesticks they shot some of the men. Everyone was tied up, even the children. Then they were made to walk for miles and miles to the coast. There the children were separated from the people of their village and put onto a ship that brought them to America, to a plantation in Alabama.

"They met other African people there. Many were Asante. All the African people took care of them as much as they could, but their lives were miserable and sad. The children saw that so many were whipped. So many cried and died. They were heartbroken.
"The slave makers did not allow the Africans to dance the way they did at home. They could only do simple dance movements that made the slave makers laugh. The children wanted to do something to help their new families. So, when they carried water to them in the fields in the afternoons, they drew proverb pictures in the soil in the rows between the cotton or corn plants—the two alligators with one stomach, the bird looking backwards, the ladder that leads from one life to a better one. When the grown-ups saw the drawings, it gave them hope, and they smiled at the children. But what made them laugh was when the slave makers made the Africans come to the fancy house where they lived, to entertain their guests. The Africans were made to stand together in the front yard and sing the new songs they had composed. After that, the slave makers always announced a special treat. The children were told to come forward and dance their 'funny little dance.' And you know what they danced?"


"Yes, they danced Adewa. They squinched their eyes in ridicule. Stamped their feet in defiance. And with their dance movements, right in front of the evil slaveholders, they said, 'We are warriors, we are powerful, you will never defeat us. Whatever you do, enemy, we will get our way.' The slave makers laughed and laughed and applauded the children. The Africans smiled lovingly, but all night in their cabins they laughed and celebrated what the children had said with their hands and eyes and feet, with their Adewa dance.

"One day, when the children came to the field to bring water, an old man
and woman whispered something to them. And then, when they carried the water down each aisle, the children drew a new proverb picture in the soil. It was the picture of the porcupine, a symbol of battle, of rebellion. The next morning, when the overseer rang the bell for the Africans to get up and go to labor in the fields, no one came out of the cabins. They were empty. All the Africans, including the dancing children, were gone. Some Africans on a nearby plantation said they had seen them flying over the fields that night, going home to Africa. Someone else said they had slipped over the state lines into Florida to live way back up in the swamps with other Africans and Indians. Wherever they were, the Africans were free and the dancing children had helped them get their freedom."

"Yay!" the class applauded. Michelle stood up and led it.

"You want to do it?" Ms. Collier asked.

Again the class cheered and applauded.

"All right," Ms. Collier rubbed her hands together. "I thought you would like it, so I already assigned you parts. I have scripts for you, with your names on them, and the part you play marked. In our play, Angic has the part of Akosua, the child born on Sunday. Angie, you are our storyteller."

"Me?" Angie asked, pointing to herself.

"Yes, you."

Angie was shocked and turned to look at Michelle, who was staring at Ms. Collier, waiting to hear about her part.

"Charlene is Adjoa, born on Monday.

Cheryl is Abena, born on Tuesday.

Pat is Akua, born on Wednesday."
Natilee is Yaa, born on Thursday
   Dawn is Afua, born on Friday
   Michelle is Amma, born on Saturday.
   And Nia is our stage manager.
   “What’s that?” Nia asked.
   “I’ll tell you. Now the boys.
   Darrell is Kwasi, born on Sunday
   Hector is Kojo, born on Monday.
   And because we only have two boys in our class,
   I am borrowing five boys from the other school where
   I teach when I’m not here. They won’t be able to come
   before the day of the performance, but they already
   know the dances because we were working at their school
   before we came to work with you. I am very pleased that
   you want to do the play. But, as I said, the Arts in Action
   program started late in this school, and we only have a
   short time to work on it before the performance.”
   “That’s all right, Ms. Collier,” Michelle assured her. “We won’t mess up.
   “We only have six rehearsals.”
   “What we gonna wear?” Charlene stood up to ask.
   “If I’m gonna dance and act, I have to look good.” She put her hands on her hips
   and styled. Michelle looked at Angie with big eyes, but
   Angie didn’t look back.
   “Angie,” Michelle touched her arm. “What’s the matter?”
   Angie didn’t answer.
   “You gonna look bad.” Ms. Collier posed like Charlene.
   “Do it, Ms. Collier!” Cheryl laughed and jumped up to
   pose alongside Charlene, Darrell and Hector whistled.
   “I’m going to give you two things to take home.
   Those of you who have someone at home who can sew,
   raise your hands. I will give you some fabric and a drawing
   of the slave costume.
It is very simple. The second thing I will give each of you is your script. Read it over carefully. Bring it back to our next class. Treat it nicely.” Ms. Collier had walked to the table as she talked. The students were gathered around her and “ooohed” and “aahed” when she showed them their African wraps and head ties. The room was noisy with their delight and excitement.
Angie and Michelle stood next to Ms. Collier. Angie still had the feeling of being in her dreaming room and she wanted to tell Ms. Collier how she felt, about Great Cousin Scatta, about the get-up gift, the shimmershine. She wanted to tell her about her mother’s depression and about Daddy not being home anymore, about how maybe sometimes she would miss class because of taking care of her two little sisters. She wanted to tell her...“Ms. Collier!” Angie pulled on her arm.

“Yes, sweetheart?” Ms. Collier turned to Angie. “I have some fabric for you. Here it is. Does your mother sew?”

Angie nodded her head but didn’t move to take the fabric or the drawing. Ms. Collier’s smile slowly faded. “Is something wrong? You have a problem?” Angie stared at her, holding on to her arm.

Michelle took Angie’s fabric and drawing from Ms. Collier. “She OK,” she told her. “Sometimes Angie can’t say nothin when she get upset. You have to wait a while. Then she can talk.”

“Really?” Ms. Collier touched Angie’s braided hair. “Well, Angie, you just take your time. Look at this beautiful braiding. I wish I could braid like this. You do this, Angie?”

“She not ready yet.” Michelle continued to explain. “My mother braided it. She teachin me and Angie. My grandmama don’t like it though.”

“You gon help us with the words?” Cheryl interrupted. “With the readin?”

“Yes.” Ms. Collier turned her head to look at Cheryl. “These is real pretty.” Cheryl reached up to touch Ms. Collier’s earrings.

“You gon help me with my readin too?” Charlene asked as she looked at Angie holding on to Ms. Collier’s arm. “How come
you don't let go her arm so she can talk to somebody else 'sides you?"

Angie didn't look at Charlene, but Michelle glared.

"Listen, everyone!" Ms. Collier put her other arm around Charlene, who folded her arms and grinned at Angie and Michelle. "Anyone who needs help with reading come to see me next Monday at twelve-thirty. OK, there's the bell. Good-bye, see you next week."

"What kinda dance we gon do?" someone asked.

"You'll find out next week. Good-bye."

"How come they ain't goin?" Charlene asked, looking Angie and Michelle up and down.

"Out, Cheryl. They're coming too. I'm going to put them out in a minute."

When the students had all gone from the room, Ms. Collier told Angie and Michelle, "Come over to the mirror."

Angie felt better now. She let go of Ms. Collier's arm and, as they walked to the mirror, she took her fabric and drawing from Michelle. She didn't go close to the mirror but leaned against the blackboard, holding her things. Ms. Collier wrapped Michelle in the colorful cloth and tied her headpiece in place.

"Look at me, I'm gorgeous." Michelle sang out the words. "Look, Angie. Come get what you're gonna wear." Michelle began to dance around the room. Angie stayed where she was.

"My mama get sick sometimes." Angie finally began to speak. "Sometimes I have to stay home from school and take care of my baby sisters and I might mess up the play." She looked down at the floor and slid her back against the blackboard as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Angie. I hope it's not serious. I hope she gets well soon."
‘She just gets depressed sometimes."

Ms. Collier took Angie’s hand and led her to the mirror. “You come when you can. Now, let us see how you look in this.” She began to wrap an amber cloth around Angie and roll it over tight at the top. “You want me to call your mother? Sometimes, when people get depressed, they feel better when they talk to someone about what’s on their mind.”

Although she was standing in front of the mirror, Angie did not look at herself in it. “Yeah,” she said quietly, “She need to talk to somebody.”

“Look at yourself. We gon’ be stars.” Michelle put her arm around Angie’s shoulder and smiled into the mirror. “We gon’ look just like twins. Look.”

Angie looked at their reflection in the mirror, then looked away. “We don’t look like no twins. You not as dark as me. Is she, Ms. Collier?”

Ms. Collier positioned them shoulder to shoulder. “Let me see. Michelle is a real nice dark brown with a little yellow and Angie is a real pretty dark brown with a little red. Just beautiful.”

Angie looked straight at Ms. Collier. “Why you want me to be the storyteller in the play?”

“Because I think it will be good for you to speak in front of an audience and because I think you will do it well.” Ms. Collier looked straight back at Angie.

“I won’t look funny?”

“No.”

“We look good, girl,” Michelle bragged again in front of the mirror. “We are too fresh.”

“I look different.” Angie looked at herself.

Ms. Collier put her hands on her hips and styled in front of the mirror. “Angie, I think you look like me, and I think I am too fine, so I don’t know what you are talking about.”
“Ooh, Ms. Collier, you sumpum else.” Angie and Michelle looked at each other and laughed.

“You numbers better sumpum else on home. Go! I’m tired.”

“Yeah, we betta go. We can’t look at ourselves no more, we too gorgeous. We the shimmershine queens.”

“The what?”

Angie and Michelle began to giggle. They collapsed on the table, burying their heads in the fabric.

“Come on, before you go, you have to tell me about the—what? Shimmershine queens?”

“That’s the name my Great Cousin Seatta gave it. You know, like when you do sumpum good and you feel warm and shiny all over your body. That’s the shimershine.”

“So you two are the shimmershine queens?”

Angie and Michelle helped Ms. Collier hang the remaining fabric and clothing in the cabinet. “We gon write a rap poem about it.” Angie grinned, picking up her book bag and putting her fabric and drawing in it.

“Can you help us?” Michelle mirrored Angie’s grin as she backed toward the door, her book bag on her back.

“Don’t you two think I have enough work?” Ms. Collier collapsed into her chair at the desk. “Good-bye.”

“Just a little bit?”

Michelle pleaded from the door, with Angie looking over her shoulder.

“A little bit. Good-bye.”

Angie and Michelle ran out into the schoolyard, making the ululation sound, startling the children still playing in the yard. They strutted and skipped down the street toward Columbus Avenue.

“I like Ms. Collier, don’t you?”

“Yes, I think she gon stay.”
Meet Camille Yarbrough

"... a people's story is the anchor dat keeps um from driftin, it's the compass to show the way to go and it's a sail dat holds the power dat takes um forward." These words, spoken by Great Cousin Seatta at one point in *The Shimmershine Queens*, reflect the outlook of the book's author, Camille Yarbrough.

Yarbrough first began to learn about African-American history and culture through dance. She studied to be a dancer for many years and was a member of the Katherine Dunham dance company. She not only performed on Broadway but also toured around the world with the cast of *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*.

When jobs in theater became hard to find, Yarbrough turned to teaching. In the schools in the Upper West Side of New York City, her students were largely African-American, Latino, and Caribbean children. Believing that knowledge of their cultural heritage would build self-confidence, Yarbrough set out to teach that heritage through music and dance—much like the teacher in *The Shimmershine Queens*. Yarbrough has also been successful in communicating this heritage through her writing; her first book, *Cornrows*, won a Coretta Scott King Award.