

Too Brown

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On the first day of grade 9 history, I saw Mrs Harshman squinting at the attendance sheet from across the classroom. I knew what was coming. “Wa - nee...” I saw her brain struggling to compute the double letters and the contradictory phonetics.

I braced myself.

“Where are you from?” she called out.

Sigh. History always repeats itself.

Where am I from? I looked around the room, my white classmates turned in their seats looking back at me. Curious but indifferent, might as well have had a flashing sign above my head that read ‘you don't belong here’ .

Where am I from?

What a loaded question. For a second I thought about blurting out ‘HERE! I’m from here! Just like the rest of you!’ But I didn’t.

I was worried my grades would suffer from my first day antics.

“Sri Lanka.” - technically wrong but theoretically right?

Sometimes it's easier to just tell them what they want to hear.

By the time I had answered, the noise of classroom chatter had already bubbled over the room. No one cared.

Everyone was curious - for a second. Everyone loved foreign. Everyone loved different.

But only in spoonfuls.

I figured no one really cared. Not that I wanted them to care. I was all about fitting in and I had done my due diligence the summer before.

And while my classmates had spent the summer in Europe basking in their golden spray tans, I had spent the last two weeks religiously scrubbing off the muddy tan I had gotten doing yard work.

I was too brown.

Not that I wanted to be white, but I wanted to be less brown.

Less different.

They loved brown skin but not too brown.

The kind that came out of a bottle.

By the time Christmas rolled around, I had successfully convinced my mom to pack me sandwiches for lunch. A step down from buying lunch at school but a step up from warming up last night's dahl and rice dinner in the cafeteria microwave.

Did that once.

Beth Mcpherson's high pitched screech of "What is that smell?!" perpetually haunts me.

Will not be doing that again.

For the next few weeks, I ate my lunch cold. But it didn't really matter. The smell of my mom's home cooking always lingered, on my clothes, on my skin, on my hair. It was bad enough that I had to sit in front of Duncan Cole. Duncan Cole with his perfect blonde hair and blue eyes. Duncan Cole. The kid you see winning prom king in movies.

The poster boy highschool crush, so effortlessly - perfect.

Great.

I spent all morning straightening my hair.

My hair smells like fried hair and fried fish.

Duncan Cole is nice. But not nice enough to not make jokes to his friends about the curryhead that sits in front of him in Calculus.

It didn't stop for the 4 years that I went to highschool. The snide remarks, maybe unintentional, maybe not.

"Hey Keisha, you should totally go out with Armaan Patel." My friend Lisa pointed out one lunch in 10th grade. She had a smug look on her face.

Seriously? Armaan Patel?

The only other brown person in our class. Armaan Patel, the exchange student from India.

What the hell do I have in common with Armaan Patel?

Maybe it was our muddy skin and our smelly hair.

I spent the first 2 years of highschool trying to fit in.

I changed how I looked, how I talked. I shortened my last name to Wann. I so desperately wanted to fit in.

I became friends with Beth Mcpherson, we sat side by side at lunch eating deli sandwiches. Matching flannel. Dark wash skinny jeans. Our straight hair brushed back into perfect ponies. We were carbon copies.

Just one slightly darker.

I spent the last two years thinking about Armaan Patel.

How he was just like me.

Sure, he didn't know what it was like to grow up in Canada. But it didn't matter. He knew what it was like to be brown. He knew what it was like to be a highschool kid, to just want to fit in. But he didn't do it at the expense of his culture; of his identity.

And yeah, my friendship with Beth didn't last very long when I realised we didn't have much in common, plus, it was only so long before my mom started making Sri Lankan - fusion deli sandwiches.

It was tiring, waking up every morning, perfecting an image of someone who I wasn't. I was ashamed. And over time, the guilt grew.

Who was I to shorten a last name that held generations of history and value. Why wasn't I proud? Why was I forcing relationships with people who didn't accept me? Not just the facade I created but the real authentic me, my culture included.

But you can't force people to accept you.

It starts with me.

If I couldn't accept myself wholly and undoubtedly, who would.

