

Private Life

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Public:

My neighbors were my best friends, my teachers and classmates. Our mothers got together on weekends and talked about funny stories, memories, and the weird things each other's 7 year olds did yesterday. My community painted my back green and white and black, our elementary school's colors. Our modesty of home did not translate to our modesty of identity, and our identity was the community. Our green, white, and black family had our yearly traditions of carnivals called "Unity Days". We had enormous class field trips, had everyone else's secrets under strict lock and key, and a monstrous curiosity that some lost along the way.

If it weren't for my mom's inheritance, we'd be living in a house like yours." I quickly learned to dissect what they meant rather than what they said, as oftentimes, they never overlapped.

I talk to my lifelong friend, a public girl, about college. She fidgets and stares at her feet. The summer air before our senior year in high school is muggy and still and pushing her neck down towards the sidewalk next to the swing-set we grew up on. As a child, she doodled, sketched, and painted constantly. Her thin bedroom carpet has paint stains tracked all over the white scratchy polyester, so you can tell which side is hers and which side is her sisters. In high school, her works were featured in the school district's art show year after year after year. She gave me little sketches as gifts for my birthday each year with a handmade card to go with it. I remember how smart she was in elementary school, and how profusely she was bullied for being a teacher's pet. She was bullied so much so that I crossed her face out in my fourth grade yearbook to seem cooler to our friends. She was always the first to raise her hand, answered each question eagerly with her lips showing her crooked teeth in the widest smile you can think of, so when I learned that she had started skipping over half of her eight classes a day, well—

I see all my old friends working in stores on the main drag: Subway, Panera, the ice cream place, the comic book store. I ran into my ex-best friend, one who shunned me for leaving for private school, cutting my bagel at Brueggers one early morning. We smiled at each other but—

"I'll just go to community college" "What about your art?" She grimaces. Not once does she look me in the eyes when she says, "That's not a career." She has other things to think about, like family, like money, like employment. What was she supposed to do about her brother and sister? Her single, three-job working mother? Her homophobic family watching her every

move, expecting her to "grow up, grow out of it," *tsk-tsk*-ing at her mother when her daughter doesn't show up to church for the third Sunday in a row.

Sometimes I feel resentment from her that somehow I made it out and now get to frolic around in my little private bubble. Now I get to entertain the idea of an out-of-state college. Now I have opportunities that I take absolute advantage of, opportunities that publics just dare to recreate. Now I take acting as a career seriously instead of a hobby to throw away. Now I live the good life! Now I am free from the fetters of federal budget cuts to arts and music programs, from the fruits and vegetables thrown in the trash, washed, and put back on our Styrofoam trays for tomorrow's lunch. Now I'm one of them.

But now? I mean right now?

Private:

Now I'm a guest at family dinners, family brunches, family church events, with families I don't belong to. I watch shiny, happy faces gab back and forth about boats and cars and overpriced dresses they claim were

I stare at dresses online; the types of dresses I can't afford, the types I thought were disgusting until—

a "steal." I'm able to see up their noses as they squawk about the best and worst universities, drop names and connections, grade other families' ways of life. I stare at my reflection in mirrors of bathrooms the size of my living room and living rooms the size of my house. I laugh

What makes me different from them? What makes me any better or worse?

along with jokes that I don't understand. I smile, I mimic, I eat off their silver platters and take leftovers home, and I weasel my way through these families' homes, their traditions, their trips to Disneyworld. And I fake it. I fake it all.

"I'll just be an investment banker or something." "Why? You'd hate that." "Yeah, but guess how much money they make?"

My public and private friends both have one thing on their mind, assumedly the same thing every standard American living in their capitalist country does: money. The earning of money, the loss of money, the earning and loss of self-respect, dignity, and a drop-top Cadillac.

When I was younger, I hated my new friends with a hidden voracity. I was wracked with anger and shame as I quietly despised my friends for their homes, their young parents, their exotic trips to different continents that I felt they didn't

When I was younger, I hated my brown eyes. I stared at the pretty, blue-eyed blonde girls in my class. I adored the green-eyed boys who all dressed and spoke the same. I wanted to change my eye color so badly and for a while, I had green eyes. Terribly, terribly, green.

cherish as much as I would have. I was disgusted by their money but wanted nothing more than to take their place in their \$400,000 three-story homes. I wanted to pretend that a \$300 dress for \$180 was a bargain and wear expensive brands as if they were

basics. I wanted to go to London, Italy, France, Greece or Mexico, see the seven wonders of the

world, meet the people, learn the language, and come home only comment that it smelled like “cigarettes and pee.” I so badly wanted to wear their skin and in some ways, I still do. But every now and again, I’m reminded of who lives inside that skin and why they don’t feel the same hunger for “success” that I did.

I’ll admit, my vision is skewed. I’m biased and so is everyone else. I did not, have not, and will not live a rough life. I never:

Wondered if I had enough food to eat

Struggled with addiction

Experienced parental divorce

Had any life-threatening, happiness-sucking, completely draining illness or chronic pain

Was abused in my home

I’ve always lived in my own home and been warm, well fed, and raised with the love and lazy Sunday morning sunbathing my cats do. I have it “better” than so many people in my city and my country, especially compared to my world at large. So who am I to complain about my faked smiles and laughs, my family’s personal struggles, and what goes on behind the bedroom door whose slam shakes the whole house? *The audacity*, I think to myself. *How dare you envy another’s privilege when you yourself have immeasurable privilege?* And it’s true. How dare I?

*How dare I?
How dare you?*