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Mixed Feelings

Adriana Wells

In my childhood, I never belonged to any home. My parents—white mom, Black dad—built private fortresses around themselves and left me to cross the bridge in between, alone. In my life, I've wandered from the slums of Southwood to the idyllic lake of Four Seasons, discovering new color palettes along the way: Salvadoran, Chinese, Indian, Ghanaian, Nepali, French, Bosnian. Even North Garden's desolate countryside showed me hues I thought impossible. Still, I never met another child that shared my soft brown curls or my evolving complexion.

Today I try to wield my biracial status as a superpower—I can invent a color that doesn't exist just by peering at my freckled face in the mirror. But does a color *really* exist if no one is around to see it? If you can only check one box on the application? If you're consistently mistaken for Mexican when someone decides what ethnicity you are? If no one names the sensation of growing up a mixed outlaw?

There's an unconventional solution to this: the process of elimination. I'm still learning what I'm not instead of who I am, still wandering from place to place in my mind.

A majority-Hispanic trailer park, Southwood was only the first home I held in my heart. From those kindergarten days, I remember girls with smooth, dark hair and boys who swore in Spanish. My best friend and her heavily Mexican father would tour the neighborhood in his truck, bringing me along. We ate beef tacos for free from Meme's porch and watched her uncles play intense games of street soccer. We went to the corner store for ice cream with our merry band of cousins and classmates. We played in brand-new parks defiled by vulgar graffiti and went home to double-wide trailers caked with grime through the years.

For its run-down appearances, Southwood was a spectacle of culture—just not mine. I felt locked out through language barriers and scathed by spices that didn't sit right on my tongue. I sat alone at the guest table at the quinceñera for my best friend's distant cousin, too terrified to join the suffocated dance floor, even when "Estoy Enamorada" played over the speakers, because I couldn't remember why I was invited in the first place.

As a despondent adult, it would be simple to attribute my poor identity development to the first home that I never belonged to, but I can't. How could I resent a beautiful place that holds so much space in my heart? In the wilder days of childhood, it's easier to remember bringing dolls to the park with my best friends. Southwood will always be tacos and street soccer.

When I moved to Four Seasons in the summer months before first grade, awareness came unexpectedly, opening an internal line of questioning I'd never thought to pursue. Perhaps this was the source of my struggle. In those early years, moving felt more like an adventure than displacement. My new home was a bright yellow townhouse at the bottom of a hill. It had a carpeted staircase and more than one bathroom, which was enough to satisfy my mom and our growing family. My sister Aleesha—the only other mixed girl I knew—and I would play alongside the lake near our house, watching geese land in the water. Soon, our neighbor Audrey joined us. She quickly became my first white friend, the one I built forts with just to tear them down and rebuild the next day. The novelty of such a friendship didn't strike until one day after school.

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After we'd constructed our greatest fortified creation to date, we settled inside, and Audrey asked about my family: Were my parents married?

No, my parents never married. I had to explain that my dad only lived with us sometimes, and sometimes within those sometimes, he slept on the couch after fights with his girlfriend, who sometimes was not my mom. Audrey was perplexed, but this wasn't a revelation for me. (Even though I used to wonder if my mom and dad would ever have a big Catholic wedding or if she'd ever become Mrs. Burton, like my best friend's parents). But for the first time I wondered if my family was truly so unorthodox that it raised questions.

It occurred to me then that Audrey and I led distinctive lives; in that moment, I learned to think in color. I had to consider every disparity, beginning with the most superficial. If this rush of awareness began the process of identity formation, then perhaps it was for the best, because I returned home that day and met some epiphanies. My mom's round, freckled cheeks plus my dad's waves equals me, the sum of two halves. I also learned that Audrey and other girls coveted my curls when they itched to braid my hair. It felt exciting to know these things about myself—and about how other people saw me—and for a while, I was proud of the identity I discovered. However, my newfound awareness never led me to believe that I was missing something critical.

I used to ask my mom questions about race. She answered my most burning question in minimalist terms. You're black and white, she once said, like an Oreo. I used to love this analogy: I was white crème mannerisms stuffed between dark skins, a recipe for sweet desirability. As a kid, I introduced myself as black and white just to impress my classmates with my rarity. I felt like a wonder—until I moved to North Garden, barely a month into fifth grade.

I switched to a tiny school hidden deep in the countryside, far from my closest friends. The classroom composition held a dark-skinned majority, and my complexion hadn't caught up yet. In the lunchroom on my first day, I sat among a group of black girls with nothing to say. They'd created a culture of their own, predetermined by race but strengthened by the customs of gossip and choir practice. I didn't fit in with the white girls either, whose heavily Southern influences brought uncomfortable realizations about my place in a hierarchy I'd never knew about. I learned that school allegiances favored consistency and loyalty to one, and flitting between the Black and white lunch tables made me feel like an invasive species instead of an exotic flower.

Today I watch my younger sisters fight their skin tones with makeup and social media filters and I think about the Oreo Analogy. Growing older, I learned eventually that the taste is less bitter when you scrape out the white crème filling and leave the cookies behind. When you accept that your own family will always compare you to a color gradient with the scientific approach of selecting a new color for the walls—the ultimate paint job that stole years of my life, through microaggressions and blatant racism.

I remember spending a day with my grandma and her boyfriend. He was Mexican and spoke little English, but he'd lived in her trailer for years to make money for his wife while she waited to enter the U.S. These details became apparent during a fight between him and my grandma. I distinctly remember how angry she was, screaming that if he wanted to lounge around on her couch, then he could just as well go back to where he came from. Similar words arose when we passed two Arab men on a downtown shopping spree. Grandma pulled me close to her and said that they were probably

terrorists. If she could spew such hatred for other people, how could she even begin to accept *my* existence?

Just like scraping the filling out of an Oreo or a brand-new paint job, it was simple for my own family to throw away the parts of me they didn't like.

And from my father's side, I never learned the art of resistance or civil disobedience. He didn't care to bring me along to block parties in his old neighborhood or introduce me to his many, many nieces and nephews. I remember only one time that I ever came close to imagining the size of his family, at a birthday party for a cousin I'd never met before. Escaping the hold of one relative into the next cramped room, I was always the lightest person in each space. Children roamed around, some asking me to tie their balloons or play pin-the-tail, but otherwise, I sat alone in the corner. That day signified a test that I didn't know of, and I suppose I'd failed. My father never brought me back to visit my cousins as promised, and years passed, and I slowly forgot all their names. Whenever I asked about one of my aunts or uncles, he'd detail his most recent interaction and recount how they're doing, where they've been, how they got there. All the while I could only wish I was there.

Although my family dynamics still make it difficult to restore the beautiful self-portrait I carried as a child, now I find that being biracial is a healing color. For years, I once agonized over how to introduce myself—Black *or* white—only to realize it didn't matter when people refuse to see the other side. I'm always wandering across the bridge between happy childhood memories and bitter adolescence. But instead of feeling lonely, I find peace in being alone, like I can finally become a color that doesn't exist, and I don't need anyone around to validate who I am. That's what's beautiful about the bridge that overlooks the fortresses built to keep me out. The place I call home shows me everything.

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