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Black Faces in Private Places

From the minute I stepped on BB&N's campus, I became the token black girl that would know everything about the latest trends, dances, and music. BB&N is one of those private schools that boasts about its wildly "diverse" community of students that achieve at an extraordinarily high level, and go on to only the most prestigious colleges. It's the type of school that has more gluten allergies than black students and gives its students an urban setting by placing it on the outskirts of Cambridge, MA, before they retreat back to their suburban towns every night. It was never a place where conversations about race happened inside or outside of classrooms until a racial slur penetrated our perfectly diverse halls. After that, teachers couldn't stop throwing the words "cultural proficiency" around. I think I was expected to enjoy the fruits of these conversations, but all they brought me was stress, discomfort, and more ignorant comments from my classmates.

"I don't think we have a problem with diversity here, I feel like everyone is different and we all appreciate the different backgrounds we each bring to the table." I watched Annabel proudly profess this nonsense to my class, clearly without any consideration of how wrong she was. What would a white girl who

plays soccer, hockey, and lacrosse know about diversity? Everything in her life is monochrome from her family to her friends, and sadly my school. I made eye contact with the other black students in class and proceeded to raise my hand, keeping eye contact with each of them. Since this was an African American Lit elective, it was one of the only classes in the whole school that had more than the usual two black students.

“I would have to argue that we have some of the worst diversity I have ever seen. In each class picture I have no trouble finding myself or my friends because we each stick out like sore thumbs.” I paused to look around for reassurance and noticed nodding heads from each of my friends and even my teacher. I continued on with more confidence, “it’s not uncommon for me to be mistaken for another black girl by either a teacher or another student, nor is it rare for me to be asked to play “black music” during a sports practice. We’re in a bubble and if you think this is real diversity, you’re wrong.” I sat back in my chair and looked around at my classmates’ faces.

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“BB&N’s mission is to promote scholarship, integrity, and kindness in diverse, curious, and motivated students. The school prepares students for lives of principled engagement in their communities and the world.”

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Due to my affinity for small class sizes and my consistent need for extra attention from my math teachers, my parents decided to focus on private schooling for my high school years. The class sizes at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High were too big for me to literally not get lost in between my classes, and “attending a private school like Buckingham Browne & Nichols would give me more educational opportunities” as my parents repeated over and over again. What they didn’t tell me was that going to this

school which sounded like a corporate law firm, would be one of the most confusing, mind-blowing culture-shocking experiences of my life.

On my first day at BB&N, I was unusually excited to start high school. I had heard rumors about how different it would be from my other schools; there would be no black people, my classmates would have “Kardashian money,” and I would never feel comfortable no matter how hard I tried. How hard could it be to go to school with people that came from different economic and social backgrounds than me? What I failed to think about in that last question was the range of differences between me and my classmates.

In my junior year history class, I finally realized what everyone had warned me about. We were having one of those generic discussions on slavery where everyone looks at the single black student for the answer. We began to talk about the Negro spirituals slaves used to sing on plantations and their hidden double meanings. My teacher read us the lyrics of “Wade in the Water” and then asked us our thoughts about the possible meaning. One of my especially white classmates confidently answered, “I think ‘Wade in the Water’ is a spiritual about the slaves swimming from Africa to America and them drowning because it was too far.” Yes. This was an actual response in a junior year U.S. History course. The confused stares from my teacher, myself, and the black boy sitting next to this girl gave her absolutely no inkling that this answer was very wrong. Instead, she looked ahead with conviction, patiently waiting for my teacher to validate her interpretation. It didn’t happen.

As I moved through my schedule, I paid close attention to each class, mentally noting the amount of students that looked like me. It didn’t take too much of my time or attention since I was usually only counting myself and one other boy or girl. Before completely discouraging myself, I waited until our first all school assembly where I could completely scan the whole student body, only to find that the number of

people that looked like me was still relatively low. There were a couple spread out through the bleachers, but a small group of brown faces sitting together caught my attention in the high corner of the bleachers. I decided to count that group as a win. I figured if they all found each other, I too could find a group in this sparse student body.

When Miley Cyrus introduced the rest of the world to “twerking” I could have killed her. From that moment on, I couldn’t even count the amount of times someone asked me to teach them how to twerk or asked me to comment on their twerking form. When I had the nerve to inform one of my classmates that I didn’t even know how to twerk, she looked me up and down in disappointment, shook her head slowly, and walked away. I didn’t realize my blackness was supposed to provide a gateway to pop culture for these suburban white kids, nor did I realize the growing disappointment I kept serving them each time a stereotype was disproved. It was like they were hoping I taught a free course in blackness, but they were highly upset when they found out I was severely under-qualified.

One of the worst parts of going to BB&N was coming back to school after summer, winter, and spring breaks when I knew my classmates had devoted all their time to sunbathing in hopes of looking less pale. I dreaded the moments I would hear, “I got so tan over spring break, I’m almost as black as you!” from girls as they held their forearms up against my to compare complexions. The first time it happened I thought it was a joke, but after studying the concentration in her eyes as she gazed back and forth between my deep brown skin and her barely sun-kissed milky skin, I realized she was completely serious.

“Yeah, *almost*,” I would respond back to satisfy them. In just my first year, it became very clear to me that every conversation one of my white classmates had with me or another black student was monumental for them at the very least. It was easy to see their pupils dilate as they would walk up to me with their latest

comment. Not only did they make it very apparent that they didn't have many interactions with black people, they expected each to be somewhat theatrical, like right out of a low budget movie that romanticizes the hood and provides cultural appropriators with enough material for decades.

They say that birds of a feather flock together, so I guess it makes sense that me and the three other black girls in my class found ourselves being close friends. After each of us unsuccessfully tried to infiltrate the impenetrable cliques that were built in middle school, we gave up and settled into a group of misfits. Every day before school we met in a study room and talked about hair, music, and other aspects of our culture without having to stop to explain anything.

“Today Ms. Makrauer confused Nick for Gerry...again.”

“Ms. Smith just asked me if my hair was real or not.”

“All the white girls keep asking Koby to teach them African, but that's not even a language.”

We spent our free blocks throughout the day meeting up again to share the latest micro aggression from our teachers or peers, and our lunch block observing the world our parents convinced us would be better for us in the long run. We held on to each other like life rafts.

Since the majority of girls at BB&N had long, straight hair, it was almost entertaining to watch them attempt to figure out my sometimes curly, sometimes braided, sometimes straight hair. Some would just stare, others would ask a series of questions that just left them more confused, and some would be so bold as to reach out and touch it like they were petting their puppy. In these instances I had no choice but to laugh it off and excuse them for not knowing, after-all, the black female community is like Fort Knox when it comes to keeping our hair care secrets under wraps.

Our busiest days were Mondays. Not only did we have our usual gossip to discuss, we also had to talk about the extravagant weekend escapades our classmates went on: skiing trips to Vail, a boys' weekend on the boat sailing around Nantucket, or the nonchalant spa day for one paying girl and 3 of her closest friends. It was almost impossible for us to not turn green with envy, but we held each other together with our basic movie nights and sleepovers. We didn't talk about school, our racist classmates and teachers, or even homework. We just existed like normal high schoolers that did facemasks to keep up with their acne, gushed over Michael Ealy, and braided our hair at night before falling asleep while listening to Beyoncé's latest album.

My classmates never realized what they were saying, but their words hit me and my friends too hard too often. At times it seemed like getting out was the only thing that would make things better, but we had to remind ourselves what was at stake here. BB&N tried to break us, but we didn't. We bent over backwards, held our heads up high, picked up our pencils, and kept moving.