

OUTSIDER

PAOLA ORTEGA

There were no white kids in Mrs. Lopez' third grade class. There were no white kids in all of Maya Angelou Elementary, at least none that I can remember. Not even a young white teacher fresh out of college with naïve hopes of changing lives in the inner city of Miami, Florida. The whitest student there, besides the occasional European-looking Argentineans, was Jessica Falcon, the Puerto Rican paraplegic with two disturbingly narrow flesh-pegs for legs, and exceptionally large breasts for a third-grader.

It was a week before Open House; we were supposed to be on our best behavior. Otherwise, Mrs. Lopez threatened to shame us by letting any parent know of any recent trespasses.

"Remember," she had warned, "I get to see your parents neth week."

I wasn't sure if Mrs. Lopez really had a lisp, or if the saliva that always accumulated till it settled at the corners of her broad, thin lips didn't let her pronounce the s very well, or if saliva welled up because of her glistening braces, or if her braces glistened because of all the saliva—either way, Mrs. Lopez had a surprisingly pretty face, and the bits of spit that flew out her with heated reprimands from time to time never ceased to amuse us.

"Don't even breathe too loud," she said, and she rushed out for some unforeseen occurrence, leaving us with a charged silence waiting to break and with the great responsibility of sitting alone and adult-less in a classroom.

I was waiting for someone to scream and trigger a bout of laughter, or for one of the boys to bravely stand on a table and start dancing for our amusement. It had been a groggy morning of times tables and long division. No one moved, more so out of boredom than the

conviction to behave.

We must have been an ugly, awkward bunch of kinky ringlets and missing teeth accustomed, by then, to no longer being centers of attention for gawking adults. Having left that place to our cuter younger siblings we were cast away, forgotten in the slowed growth of pre-pubescence. I was watching the plain wall clock with the red second-hand. This one didn't tick. It just glided smoothly over the digits, aging us. I wondered how much time there was between each second; wasn't that time too? A sneeze. Stifled giggles. Still no Mrs. Lopez.

I looked down at the folder on my desk labeled, "Mrs. Lopez' TEAM Class: Teaching Enrichment Activities for Minority Students." That had been the first year, 1998, that I had been introduced to the word minority. I felt special to have made the TEAM class. I felt smart. We were a smart bunch strategically placed in one class because of all our smartness. That's what I was told.

I thought about opening my Nancy Drew book but let my gaze bounce around in boredom instead. It landed on Vanessa St. Hilaire, the tall Haitian girl with really long fingernails and ashy ankles. She had a head of bushy hair deep brown that faded into honey at the ends like cockroach wings. She cried for everything. If the teacher yelled at her, she cried, if somebody called her ugly, she cried, if someone said she was a crybaby, she'd cry and everyone would laugh at her, especially the boys. I only laughed sometimes. She would let out these high-pitched shrieks in her crackly voice that almost seemed feigned; it always made everybody laugh harder. I felt sorry for her. She was sitting there pathetically writing in the Lisa Frank journal she always carried—the one with the bright rainbows and unicorns—pressing down on the page and choking her pencil so hard I thought she'd either snap it or write herself into a broken tip. She habitually held her face about an inch from the page and wrinkled her forehead in effort and concentration that, frankly, were hardly necessary. So I never gave her the pleasure of asking what she was writing about nor complimenting the bright journal she hugged against her chest everywhere she went, even to P.E. and the bathroom!

The noon October sun blasted through the windows reminding us that there were still three hours before we could be freed into the noise of bustling 17th Avenue. The Caribbean street vendors would be yelling

at people that the limes were eight for a dollar. Traffic was always slow enough on the way home to give me time to study the names of—Cookie’s Salon—every Dominican hair—Milly’s Unisex—Bachata Barbers—salon and barbershop that lined the noisy strip.

The room was bright and warm. Inviting. The sunlight made the hairs on my arms glisten in a gold hue. The AC made them erect and sharp like the tiny spikes on roach legs. I let my head down onto my arm and watched Rafael Acosta, a yellow boy with yellow kinks, entertain himself by tilting his head down and opening and closing his mouth repeatedly touching his chin to his chest. Ten years later we would end up at the same university; he’d go off to become a prominent lawyer.

“What a weirdo,” I thought.

The other boys thought he was effeminate so I was ashamed that we were from the same place. My mom spotted him once when she picked me up after school and was amazed by his features. “What a jabao!” she had exclaimed— that’s what you’re called in Dominican Spanish when almost everything about you is Black except your skin. I rolled my eyes away from Rafael Acosta and his jaw, away from Vanessa St. Hilaire and her long pencil-like fingers, away from the tiny gold roach spikes on my arms still erect from the cold air, back to the red sweeping second-hand that had made us about nine minutes and twenty-one seconds older.

It had taken me longer than I liked to admit to learn how to tell time on analog clocks in the second grade. Numbers made me anxious. I was never confident at math but I was still the smartest girl in the class, at least, according to everyone else I was. I got straight A’s. I must admit that Gina Jean—another Haitian girl—was the other smartest girl in the class; she also got straight A’s. She wore a neatly ironed chemise every day. I was a lot more tomboyish. I always chose to wear a dark green school t-shirt with a scroll emblem and “the mighty poets” written on it. I secretly thought Gina might be smarter than me. She drew better than I did and seemed more confident in math. After college she would become a famous illustrator of children’s books. I was always secretly impressed by her projects in art class and no matter how hard I tried I could never draw or paint as well as she did.

Eleven minutes. The second-hand was sweeping over the six. My classmates were getting restless. Khoury Smith, the black boy with the

long eyelashes, my crush, sitting across from me, had started complaining loudly about boredom. Arcelly Martinez had tried unsuccessfully to trigger laughter by making animal noises. I was growing even more annoyed with Vanessa St. Hilaire who had now clamped her teeth onto her bottom lip as she wrote and—

“Whose parents am I going to have a chat with?” Mrs. Lopez’ voice made my thoughts scatter like roaches at the switch of a light bulb.

She had poked her head in surreptitiously, as if to catch someone dancing on tables before they had a chance to get down. “You all are such wonderful students. I want you all to say hi to our new classmate, Vanessa Johnson! Now we have two Vanessas.” Mrs. Lopez held the girl’s hand up as she if were a boxing champion. There were no white kids at Maya Elementary so when Vanessa Johnson strolled in that afternoon wearing a flowered dress down to her heels with a fuzzy sweater draped over her shoulders and her long strawberry-blonde hair and pink cheeks to match, sea-blue eyes and freckled nose, we eyed her as if she were a rare species.

I decided that she wasn’t exactly pretty but she had all the storybook features that we knew made people stop to exclaim how lovely she was, the kind of features worthy of being in the black and white sample photos that came with the picture frames at the dollar store. I instantly felt browner. I used to stare at those pictures of little white girls angelically sitting among trees with their pretty dresses and flowing hair and melodramatically wonder if my bushy pony tail and me could ever be delicate enough to sit in flowery frames on the shelves of Walmarts and Walgreens and dollar stores across America.

“She’s pretty,” said Ada Vasquez, the Nicaraguan girl with blonde, straight hair deader than an animal carcass. Sure she was white, but Ada had just come to the states from Nicaragua a year before; she was one of us. I never really identified with the Nicaraguans, the Hondurans, or the other Central or South American kids. They had straight hair and their Spanish was very different from mine. I didn’t readily identify with the African American kids either, their English was better than mine, except sometimes they stretched or cut words in ways us “Spanish” kids knew our teacher disapproved of. However, people like Vanessa Johnson subconsciously forced us into unity.

“She’s very pretty,” I heard Vanessa St. Hilaire echo ingratiatingly

from across the room.

“She’s not that pretty,” whispered Rafael Acosta, “she got a lot of spots on her face. You think she’s rich?”

Khoury Smith paused his light drumming on the table, “Yeah, she prolly lives in a big house with a pool.”

I thought about the small apartment I lived in where I shared a bedroom with my younger brother and baby sister, and my grouchy great-grandmother who never let us touch her bed. “You know, just because she’s white doesn’t mean she’s rich, Khoury,” I corrected him as I eyed the newcomer’s dirty book bag and raggedy frilly socks.

“Good afternoon everyone,” Vanessa said boldly as Mrs. Lopez led her to the corner seat at Bus Table. She slumped onto the chair and blew air up with her bottom lip jutting out. Her sigh ruffled her bangs and slightly disturbed the laminated picture of the yellow school bus hanging pendulously from a string of yarn that Mrs. Lopez had taped to the ceiling. I heard stifled giggles from Pen Table. I was amazed by her confident address to the class.

“Tell us where you’re from,” Mrs. Lopez asked in an excessively kind manner.

“Utah,” she smiled.

“Wow, that’s far. Do you know where it is on the map?” the teacher asked.

Vanessa nodded smilingly and impressed everyone by making her way to the board and drawing the unique shape of the state of Utah. That, frankly, was hardly necessary.

I agonized for the next few days. She, the Invader, would raise her hand with her palm turned toward herself. Like a somberly wise Greek statue or some wise-looking figure, she would study the lines on her palm while she patiently waited to be called on. And she always acted delightedly surprised when Mrs. Lopez picked her out of the group to answer questions.

“What a weirdo,” I thought. She always gave perfectly correct answers. Every time she had to use the bathroom she would ask politely, “May I use the ladies’ room?” I found it annoying that she would ask to go to the ladies’ room when the bathroom in our classroom was for both boys and girls. I learned the word unisex that year. My English had gotten

better. I was not so afraid of school anymore like I was when we first migrated from the island to Miami.

I wasn't the only one who noticed that Vanessa was a weird creature. Some of the boys called her freckleface. They laughed if she tripped. None of the girls seemed interested in being her friend except, of course, Vanessa St. Hilaire.

"We have the same name," Vanessa had approached her on her first day.

"Oh really?" Vanessa Johnson had replied rather indifferently, "my middle name is Marie just like my great-great grandmother who died when I was five. I remember her."

Vanessa St. Hilaire was impressed. On her fourth day in our class, the Invader gave a wrong answer during the multiplication lesson. I heard Khoury Smith mutter, "About time she gets something wrong." I was secretly delighted. On the fifth day, Gina came up to us as we gathered for a kickball game during P.E. and reported what she had witnessed:

"I was sitting next to the new girl and I saw that she wrote in her journal, 'Dear Journal, I'm in my new school but the kids here don't like me.'"

Ada Vasquez put her hand over mouth and laughed.

"May I use the ladies' room?" Khoury Smith batted his eyelashes mockingly.

"She's weird," Arcelly Martinez observed. We all concurred. I reveled. We made fun of her in our bad, high-pitched, accented Englishes.

On the sixth day of her invasion, we worked on essays about the trash cycle. I read my paper out loud and received the usual "very good" from my teacher. Then, it was her turn. Vanessa Johnson stood up and read her essay in perfect English. I was devastated.

"Some trash goes through a recycling process, other trash goes to a landfill, and then the cycle begins all over again." She received an enthusiastic "excellent!" that bruised my ego although I could not help but feel impressed that Vanessa used big words like "process" and "cycle" and uttered them in perfect white American English. She was threatening my throne with her correctness.

Alas, a week of agony had passed. I found some temporary relief in the prospect of showing off all my A-plus work to my dad at Open House.

My mom had to work at night and would not make it. I didn't mind. She didn't speak English as well as my father did and would probably embarrass me with her accent and her giddy remarks.

"Hello all, I am so happy to finally meet you, you have wonderful kids," Mrs. Lopez had started her speech. I was highly embarrassed and annoyed that we had entered the classroom after everyone had already been seated. "See I told you we were gonna be late," I whispered to my father. He half-smiled at me and wrinkled his brow at my unwarranted distress.

I looked around at all the neatly ironed, perfumed adults. I found it funny how elementary school teachers and Open House events were of such serious repute for immigrant parents. My mom had licked her thumb and tried to clean a spot on my face before I left the house but I didn't let her. I shuddered at the thought in disgust. She had fussed over my wrinkled blouse.

"It's just Open House," I had told her brushing her hand away from my face.

"Pues, vete con tu cara sucia y camisa arrugá!" My mother yelled in disgust, her pointy nose jutting forward like an index finger. She decided that my punishment would be to let me get to school with a dirty face and a wrinkled blouse.

I overheard Arcelly's mom whisper to her in a familiar tone, "Oye, tenias que haber planchado esa blusa, chica." She scolded her daughter in Cuban Spanish.

A raised white hand, palm facing away from me, caught my attention. I had forgotten all about the Outsider's existence.

"May I use the ladies' room outside in the hall? There's someone currently occupying the restroom in here," Vanessa asked politely.

The immigrant parents stared at her with smiling eyes as if they were looking at an angel. I noticed that she had been wearing the same dress from earlier that day—the black one with the floral pattern of red roses and dark green leaves. As she quietly stood up and exited the classroom, I saw no parents that I could match with the Outsider.

Later, as parents mingled and walked around the classroom oohing and aahing at our paintings and projects, I went up to Gina Jean and inquired about Vanessa Johnson's parents. Gina always seemed to know

everything.

“I heard she stayed here after school with Mrs. Lopez helping her fix the classroom for Open House tonight,” Gina whispered. I felt a sting of envy at all those hours she had gotten to spend intimately with Mrs. Lopez. “Her parents didn’t come,” Gina continued, “I heard Mrs. Lopez tell Mrs. Padrón that she was going to take the new girl home because no one could pick her up today.”

I wasn’t sure if it was just plain curiosity, or if it was a tinge of pleasure that I experienced at the thought of Vanessa Johnson not being so dear to her parents that they would possibly neglect to pick her up from school. Either way, I decided I would ask her myself why she never went home. A slight satisfaction came over me at the thought of the embarrassment my question would cause her.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” Mrs. Lopez was saying her last few goodbyes and parents and children were filing out of the room. It was only when my father suggested that we leave that I realized that Vanessa Johnson had not returned from her trip to the bathroom.

“Daddy,” I casually informed him, “I’m going to the bathroom in the hallway, I can meet you by the front doors of the school.”

My father, who had grown rather impatient and eager to get home to a cup of coffee and late-night news, agreed and said he would pull the car up to the curb. He was completely oblivious to my scheme. I would find Vanessa and watch her cheeks turn even brighter red as she explained why no one picked her up from school that day.

Maya’s dusky halls seemed even longer in the evening. As I turned the corner, I could not see the end of the hallway in the dimming sunlight. The cream-colored walls bore the shadowy patterns of leaves from the trees planted in the terrace, and the branches cast sharp, shadowy claws onto the walls. At that moment, something like a small seed landed on my head and rolled onto the grass. I decided the wind had carried it. I felt like running. I walked briskly past the rose bushes and pushed through the door into the bright white light of the first-floor bathroom. It was empty. I walked back outside into the shadows. The faint chatter of parents and the distant laughter and stomping of children running toward the front doors of the school made me feel far away and alone. I shivered.

I had given up on finding Vanessa when I heard yelps and what

sounded like flesh banging on metal. The sounds were coming from the second floor. I shot up the stairs and stopped halfway afraid of what I would see when I emerged from behind the wall.

“Help!” The cries had grown more frantic. “Someone help!”

I thought I’d find some dark figure trying to kidnap Vanessa: every third-grader’s worst nightmare. I gulped heavily with every step, placed my hand over my chest to calm the tremors, and peered from behind the wall. I retreated.

Vannessa Johnson was on her knees. She had gotten her head stuck between the metal railings. She was banging furiously on the thin iron bars. She’d take turns between yelling and trying to pull the bars apart with her bare hands. The tremors in my chest eased. I almost laughed. I’m not sure if I almost laughed out of nervousness or from the sight of Vannessa Johnson trying to pull metal railings apart. It seemed as if she had been trying to get a better look at the roses and had pushed her head through the metal bars to look out over the terrace.

“How dumb,” I thought happily. I stood behind the wall at the top of the stairs with my hand over my mouth half stifling a desire to laugh and half deriding myself for my childish ambivalence.

All the classrooms on the second floor were empty. I wondered if Mrs. Lopez would come up looking for her or leave her. No one would come this way until Mr. Parchman, the janitor, swept the hall at six in the morning.

“I should go tell someone,” I thought.

“I hear you there, why won’t you help me!” Vannessa yelled, and realizing that she was aware of my presence, I felt the pounding in my chest start up again.

“Had she seen me?” I wondered terrified.

She shrieked. I peered from behind the wall. She had turned sideways and had succeeded in getting her bony left shoulder and half of her torso through the two metal bars that had first mercilessly trapped her strawberry-blonde head.

“Help me I can’t breathe,” she was crying now.

“Oh my God,” my chest pounded. If she kept pushing through she would dive right into the thorny rose bushes on the first floor. I noticed the red second-hand gliding over the digits on the wall clock in Mrs. Padron’s

classroom. The lights were on inside the empty room. Another loud shriek suddenly shook me out of my panicked quandary. I shot back down the stairs, ran past the first-floor bathroom.

“Hey! What are you doing,” Vanessa St. Hilaire had emerged from behind the bathroom door pouring bright white light onto the dark hallway walls. I had brushed past her and made her drop the journal she held against her chest.

I ran. I didn’t stop running until I got to the passenger door of my father’s station wagon. He had brought the car up to the curb and was impatiently waiting for me. I waited an eternity of seconds for him to press the unlock button, slumped into the seat, and with my bottom lip sticking out, let out a heavy puff.

“What took so long?” My father asked. I searched for answers in the lines on the palm of my hand. My nails peeked over the tips of my fingers like crescent moons. I could feel the skin behind my ears heating up, my heart was convulsing in my chest. “What’s wrong?” he probed.

“Is this a heart attack?” I thought.

“I said, what’s wrong?” He asked accusingly as if he knew I had just committed a grave crime. Not responding when he addressed me was always an egregious offense. Would she die? Would one of the janitors pass by early in the morning only to find bloody limbs sticking out of the rose bushes? We were almost five blocks away from Maya when the sounds of sirens thrust me into greater, more terrible alarm. I lowered myself in the passenger seat until the world beyond the glass was hardly visible, and pressed on the imaginary gas pedal under my right foot. Would Vanessa St. Hilaire find her and then accuse me of abandoning Vanessa Johnson? More convulsions in my chest. I’m gonna die, I thought. At least when they come looking for me I’ll be dead and everyone will feel sorry for me too. I thought about Vanessa’s screams. I thought about my mother’s sobs when she came out to greet us and discovered my cold, limp body in the passenger seat.

“How could someone so young die from a heart attack? So young, so sad,” the adults would say when they heard about my decease.

“Que te pasa?” His voice was stern now; he always resorted to Spanish when he was really serious. I looked up at the merciless red glare of the stoplight, and blinked back the sting in my eyes.

“Nada,” I said and realizing that I had neglected to put on my seatbelt, I reached back for it and lowered it diagonally across my torso. The stiff edge rubbed against my neck as if to slice it, kind of like how people in the movies dragged their thumbs across their necks to signify someone’s imminent death.

“What did you say?” he insisted.

“Nothing,” I responded loud enough for him to hear this time hoping that the loud click of the seatbelt had masked the crack in my voice.

By the next morning I was a nervous wreck. I had had a sleepless night expecting the police to show up at my door. I packed a small bag that night just in case, even remembered to put my toothbrush in.

“Paola, what is all this stuff for?” My mother surprised me. Her arched eyebrows deformed into tildes of confusion.

“I’m playing house. I’m going on a trip.” I answered impatiently.

“Don’t even think you’re taking that bag to school, your book bag is much too heavy already. You’ll break your back.” My mother had a way of handing out arbitrary commands that made me think of childhood as mere children’s subjugation to impatient adults. “Put all those clothes back, you’ll just leave a mess for me to clean up later.”

I had hoped that my mom would see how thoughtful and prepared I was in case they arrived to take me away. “Such a brave and thoughtful girl my daughter is,” she would solemnly say as they escorted me out in handcuffs. They never came.

I walked into class nervously the next morning, half-expecting to find everyone mourning the loss of our classmate, half-expecting to find the police waiting for me. I was a bit relieved to find that everyone was behaving normally. I floated to my seat at Paper Table. I could still picture her squirming and yelping. In my apprehension I had reached my table without even glancing at the corner seat of Bus Table. I tried to look up without moving my head. I could see the laminated picture of a lined sheet of school paper swinging lightly back and forth mocking my moods. I had hoped to see the faint reflection of a strawberry-blonde head in the glare of the lamina. No such luck. I could feel Vanessa sitting there with her hands neatly folded, and her brand new and freshly sharpened pencil resting in the crease of her old-fashioned composition notebook.

“Okay, get your notebooks out,” Mrs. Lopez said. I hoped she’d call

roll. No such luck. She never did call roll. She knew us well enough that she would simply mark whoever was absent or tardy. Without disturbing the rest of my tense body, which had now become simply a vessel that carried my anxiety, I turned my head around as much as my neck would allow, not unlike old Barbies and tattered action figures mistreated by their careless owners. Her chair was empty. “Today we’re going to continue our lesson on big, nasty cockroaches and other insects!”

I let out an infinitesimal sigh of relief, took my notebook out, rested my decrepit, eraser-less Number 2 pencil in the crease, and waited.

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE
THE JOURNAL
WENTWORTH HALL
HANOVER, NH 03755
ISSN #2327-8064 VOL.1 NO.2
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