

from: Home + Homeland!

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(Eds)

FIGHTING

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I CAN STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER MY first Home Economics class in Canada. It was my first week in

Grade 7 and I remember walking in late because I was still trying to figure out how to find my way around the school. Most of the students were already seated, waiting for the class to begin and I confidently chose the first seat available and sat down. I hadn't even sat down properly when the Chinese guy beside me got up so forcefully that he knocked down his chair with a loud crash behind him. "I ain't sitting beside HER!" he yelled scornfully with disgust written all over his face.

It took me a few seconds to register the fact that he actually meant me. That there was something about me, something that everyone was aware of judging from their faces, that was terrible enough to make someone want to avoid me.

I still can't understand why I did it, maybe it was some kind of pride, but I actually stood up, collected my books and walked over to another chair (one that was sufficiently far from the others) and sat down without a word. There was pin-drop silence in the room for a few seconds and then, as if the incident had never occurred, class began.

Later, I walked home and I remember playing the scene again and again in my mind. I was crying because I had been rejected but I honestly didn't know why that kid had done that to me. I was 13 years old and until that day it had never occurred to me that I was different. It wasn't that I had led a very sheltered life when my family had lived in the Middle East because I had gone to school with a mixture of children of all colours, from different countries of the world. It was simply the fact that I had never before noticed the "difference" between people of other colours and me.

It may seem hard to believe, but I was actually unaware of the notion of racism. No one had ever prepared me for this concept that some people in the world are considered, by some, to be "better" than others. Until that point in my life, I had thought of myself like any

other 13-year-old in the world. My sixth day in Canada, in that symbolic event at class, was the day that I experienced a certain change in my self-concept. It was a moment of disillusionment in what it meant to be me. To an innocent pre-adolescent, there was no comprehension or insight to see that this is what it meant to be oneself in a predominantly white society. It simply meant, "this is what it means to be me. I am different. I am undesirable."

We lived in downtown Toronto at that time. And I still can't get over the fact that children of many races (Chinese, Caucasian and Black) found me an object of ridicule. I dressed like them, my English was at times even better than theirs (my accent wasn't that pronounced, even at that time) and yet they called me names and rejected me. It just served to bring home the fact that everyone thought I was distasteful. I cried each and every single day for my first three months in Canada. I was too ashamed to tell my mom. How could I when I had spoken to her with so much enthusiasm about how much I would like school here? I had boasted to her that I would be the smartest in my class.

One day I was sitting in English class and "Rick" kept calling me names across a few desks. Suddenly, I could take it no longer. I began to write in my English book. I wrote of all the things that people were calling me, how much it hurt, how much I hated Rick. Then I ripped off the page, walked over to the black supply teacher we had that day, handed it to her and went back to my seat. I just felt so good to get it out of my system and I wasn't a bit remorseful when she called me over and told me that the principal was waiting to see me in his office downstairs.

I can't remember his face but I do remember that he put his arm around my shoulder after he finished reading my letter. He asked me to fill in one of the blanks that I had left in one of the sentences and I told him the missing word but I remember that I didn't even know what that swear word meant at that time. We spoke for a while and he was kind but none of his words had any impact. All that I remember is the comfort I felt in having his arm around my shoulder. Next day, Rick wasn't in class. He had been suspended for a week and when he came back he never said a word to me again. My parents were never notified and I don't think I ever told them about it.

Just when I started making friends (I let them cheat off my paper on tests to get them to like me), my family moved to Unionville, which is right in the centre of Markham. My whole public school was full of white children whose parents made over \$35 000 a year. By the end of Grade 8, I had encountered another "Rick" (three of them actually) and I did the same thing again: I spoke to my teacher who gave them and the class a big lecture and made the offenders speak with me privately and apologize to me.

When I started high school I was full of renewed hope and enthusiasm. I had won the coveted "Actress of the Year" award in public school and had become quite popular. Little did I know that my troubles were just starting. I was the only "brown person" (there was one black guy) among 2 500 high school students but that didn't really bother me until one day in Grade 9.

I had almost reached my locker when I saw something written on it (with marker) in huge black letters. "GO HOME PAKI" it read, "BACK TO INDIA WHERE YOU CAME FROM." I was trembling with rage and tears and I found myself unable to go near the locker. It would be so embarrassing if anyone realized that those words were for me. I wasn't even from Pakistan. Besides, Pakistanis aren't from India anyway. All sorts of thoughts were flashing through my mind — I was trying to console myself but it wasn't working.

Almost every day, throughout Grade 9, I found myself at the principal's office complaining about various sayings that kept appearing on my locker door, and they would send a janitor down to wipe it off. Then, it appeared as if someone was trying to break into my locker. I would find my combination lock malfunctioning or half-broken. I must have gone through at least 10 locks that year (I even tried key locks or using two locks at a time but nothing helped). Then, "they" started covering the locks with masking tape, or taping all the edges of the locker. Sometimes they would spray the lock with shaving cream, and once I reached out unsuspectingly to touch my lock and found it covered with spit.

Life became miserable. My self-esteem just deteriorated and I had to face the shame of walking up to my locker and having people stare as I'd try to deal with the latest "prank." The principal told me to report my suspects to him but that was useless. Could it be the

girl in my Phys. Ed. class who was always making **JAFER** comments about "Pakis?" Or the kids in English who made me trip whenever I walked into class? Or the boys in Physics who spoke in a funny accent and joked about wearing turbans and living in straw huts? Each one of these people was sent to the principal's office and still no one owned up to being the culprit behind the "pranks."

I started getting nightmares about finding my locker full of snakes and spiders; my nightmares almost came true when I found my locker without a lock one day. I didn't have the courage to open it myself because I was afraid of what I'd find in there. When my friend opened it for me she found nothing inside: All my books had been stolen and exams were in two weeks.

It didn't occur to me at the time but I wonder why it didn't strike the principal to change my locker number or provide a guidance counsellor for me. Why did I spend my class times doing surveillance of my locker in the hopes of finding the culprit instead of the high school providing someone to do this for me?

I guess everyone thought it would stop someday but did anyone ask me how I was feeling during all this? Did anyone notice that I was becoming depressed, that I would shuffle my feet and look down when I walked or that I didn't say much because I was afraid that people would laugh at my accent? Did anyone bother telling me that it was "they" (the racists) who had a problem and not me? Sadly enough, no one bothered to do any of this. I had to help myself. And I didn't know how. All my life I had been taught to turn the other cheek and to ignore rude people because "they'll soon get tired and stop." But none of these sugar-coated philosophies worked. No one stopped.

I tried to ignore it when boys in the bus seat behind me pulled my hair and called me names, but it didn't do any good — it simply resulted in them laughing as I covered my face and cried into my hands in front of everyone.

I went through many stages and conflicts in dealing with my experiences. I would plead with God to help me and my faith would keep me going. Then I would go through a period when I'd scorn God and question His existence, telling myself that if there was a God then He would not have waited this long and let me be in so much pain. I believed that I was ugly, that I had nothing worthwhile

to offer to anyone. Then I would feel delusions of grandeur and think of myself as above everybody else. I wanted to be unnoticed and invisible. Then I'd want everyone to give me attention, to see me like my family saw me: as a beautiful, talented, intelligent, interesting person.

In the end, I found myself arriving at a new philosophy, "God helps those who help themselves." I found the culprit who was doing all those things to my locker (I saw him while I was doing surveillance and grabbed the girl standing beside me in the hall, pleading to her to be my witness) and when the principal arranged for a meeting between "Mark" and me (and "Mark's" father), I brought my brother along as moral support.

In that tiny office I looked Mark in the eyes and spoke with confidence and sincerity. The odd thing is that I felt compassion for Mark as he sat there in his leather jacket, his fists clenched as he struggled to get the apology out. He just couldn't say it and his eyes looked watery. I found myself crying for the person who had made my life so miserable.

"Mark, I don't want you to go through this," I said, "It doesn't make me happy to see you get in trouble. I just want you to understand and I want you to tell your gang, too, that what you did to me was wrong. It hurt me so much. And it was so unfair. What have I ever done to you? I don't even know you. And you don't even know me... so how can you know how clean I keep myself or whether my father wears a turban or even where I come from."

Mark and his friends never bothered me again. But I found myself attempting to change and be more like everyone else. I don't know if it was for the better, but it helped improve things in my life. I began to dress in a trendy style and memorized the pronunciation of various words to improve my accent. And one day, when a guy (who seemed to have sworn an oath to yell "Paki" across the hall whenever he saw me) did his regular routine, I turned around and held up my middle finger. He actually bumped into someone, he was so shocked. Needless to say, he never did that again.

I have grown up a lot since then. Today, I can honestly say, with conviction, that my experience made me into a very strong and confident person. Instead of letting racism push me into a little shell, I used it to grow as a person. I have literally made myself ask

questions in class or speak in front of a large audience. And instead of letting myself feel shame, I have developed a love and pride for my culture and religion and often try to dispel myths and educate people about it.

My ten years in Canada have taught me that racism will always haunt and follow you around because there is a lot that needs to be done to educate some people, even at university. The task is to fight it. You can't let it swallow you and make you a part of itself so that you start viewing yourself the way it views you. You have to believe in yourself. And you have to use it to make it into some sort of a positive experience so that you can grow from it. It's not easy at all, sometimes it's downright impossible... but you have to keep fighting.

Because often enough, everything in your life depends on it.