

The Bunny Raised in the Jungle

Some kids were encouraged to go outside more instead of being cooped inside all day. Parents would try to motivate their young children to go and make friends in the nearby park. Well, for me, my parents were the opposite. I was encouraged to stay indoors. I'm not complaining about being stuck at home all day. My old collection of *Archie* comics and the entire series of *Percy Jackson* were enough to keep me entertained. When I got tired of reading their stories for the hundredth time, I started to create my own. I would write about my adventures across the world. Travelling through the deserts of Egypt, having tea with Queen Elizabeth II in England, and training to become a ninja in Japan were just some of the things I would write about. Even some more superficial stories of me roaming downtown Toronto streets.

It was only later I realized *why* I confined myself to my bedroom and entertained myself with nothing but my pencil and notebook - my parents were trying to keep me safe.

It might sound like I didn't have many friends in elementary school, but I did. I just never saw them outside of school. When I was writing my next big trip around the globe, I'd hear my next-door neighbour and classmate playing volleyball over the yellow gate that connected us with the other townhouse. I would ask my mom if I could join them, and she'd agreed, but I was never allowed to go on the other side of that yellow gate. God forbid I went into the townhouse next to us.

I would walk to my elementary school just across the street and see the yellow tape in the corner of my eye. My neighbour's grandmother, who would walk him and me, would always hold our hands tighter when she saw that. I'd hear blaring alarms of ambulances and police cars fade in and out sometimes as I did my homework. I would mindlessly stare at the red and blue lights dancing through my bedroom window. I thought I was sleeping through fireworks, thinking some celebration was happening.

Grades 7 and 8 were when I started to pay attention to my surroundings, and I learnt what the word "ghetto" was after I heard my classmates talking about it. I admit my area may not be the most appealing, but that's home to me. That's what I consider my safe place after a long day of elementary school. Then, somehow, along the lines of high school, that moulded into my identity.

Through the magic of the internet and Google, I quickly learned more about the area's history and started understanding why *ghetto* was used to describe my neighbourhood. But I didn't know that word would follow me throughout adolescence.

I still didn't pay any mind to what I found. But then there was this school field trip to a Toronto Raptors game. Parents signed a permission slip and it was put into a lottery system to pick lucky students. My name was drawn. I was excited as a kid, since it would be a Darke's night special and other lucky goers get to sit in the luxurious box seats. Adorned with unlimited pizza and sodas and collected cool Raptor merch. Seeing my our school's name on the Jumbotron, I was the luckiest kid in the world for the night.

Coming back into class, my teacher was glad that some of the kids enjoyed themselves. But highlighted and boldly said that he didn't like how the news outlets depicted schools like ours as

underprivileged. It got me thinking that maybe the opportunities I'd get in life were only handouts. Yet, that still wasn't the end of it.

A girl asked me where I lived during high school. I thought nothing much and answered. She said, "gang, gang." I would just tell people I lived near a different intersection after that. I don't know what I felt when she said that to me. Ashamed? Embarrassed? Maybe it was a mix of those, but I don't know, and I still don't know to this very day.

Then years passed, and I started talking to more people outside school. I'd just say I'm from Scarborough. They wouldn't believe me, though. I was always met with either a face of confusion or a double take followed by their eyes checking me out like they would verify my address. Apparently, I don't sound like or look like I live around there. That didn't sit right with me, either. I used slang more often, not caring about enunciating my words and acknowledging that I lived in the *ghetto*. I guess I was embracing where I come from, or so I thought. I would always notice my half-sister, half-Ethiopian and half-Filipino, cringe whenever she heard me saying, "fam" or "ahlie." I knew I needed to stop.

Dating was challenging. Whenever a guy picked me up for a date, I always told them to pick me up near Krispy Kreme in Kingston. I'd settle myself inside his car, conversing before I buckled up. Then I would hear that word again.

"Dang, you really live in the *ghetto ghetto*." Hearing that again, I was ready to text my sister to call me to get out of this date. But that question seemed to be reiterated in many ways, too.

"I didn't expect you to live in this end."

"Even my folks were confused about why I was coming out here to see you."

"Didn't this place have a gang?"

Those first dates were my last of them. Their genuine fascination with where I lived was concerning, to say the least, and their discomfort if we'd stay there for too long.

At the end of my adolescence, I came to an epiphany one day. No matter where I go, I will have the same address regardless of the school or job I apply to. My hometown will forever be that place 20 minutes away from the Danzig shooting. But also the place where I made best friends and hit every milestone of my life. I can't change the perceptions, or the history of where I live. I can just change how I'll carry it with me.