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A Reoccurring Envy

When I first worked at the Lowell School as a teenager, I was uncomfortable. This wasn't because I was lousy with kids or lazy—which I was—but because I was, like many poor kids, simultaneously full of loathing and lust for the rich. DC is a choleric place to wrestle with class, succumbing as it does to the main ugliness of capitalism: the lurid proximity of the rich and the broke. In fact, the convergence was visible at the Lowell School: while we excised teary three-year-olds from Benzes and Beemers, the homeless lined up for donated groceries.

At its current location¹ Lowell sits on a hill overlooking a creek and tadpole-filled pond. It is, simply put, idyllic. Having refurbished Gallaudet University's old campus, the school, due in no small part to its buttery paint job, practically glows from its perch overlooking a nature reserve that dumps into Rock Creek Park. There is a functional clock tower, an elevator, a hardwood dance floor, four playgrounds, three parking lots and two decorative bridges designed by the older students, though the creek is truly a trickle. There are three unattached buildings where woodshop, occupational therapy and after school programs occur, and an indoor pool. The school even boasts its own language, a style of pedagogy that never corrects, punishes or alienates. The children call adults by their first name, there are no grades, and the over polite Lowell Language is the vernacular; we never "warn," only "remind."

¹ When I was sixteen the school had yet to move to its current location. The Pre Primary was housed in the basement of a church across the street from the Carter Baron Amphitheater. During summers, local herds routinely clogged 16th Street for tennis tournaments, lightweight jazz concerts and often enough, for nothing at all. The primary, which at that time only went up to the third grade, was conducted in a rehashed mansion that now houses the British School, flanked by Buddhist temples and various lesser embassies.

Prior to Lowell I had little understanding of private school outside what I had gleaned from *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* and teen movies set in all-boy prep schools. What I learned I liked, largely because it was white and clean, the antithesis of my own surroundings in Southwest Park Apartments. At Lowell I discovered, to my gradual disdain, that my education had been, to put it diplomatically, *inadequate*, and furthermore, school had been downright tragic for those friends of mine who could not jangle the cultural capital I had been bequeathed for being South Asian (the kind assumption, for example, that I was well behaved and gifted at math).

The derelictions we withstood occurred to me in increments, as I graduated and graduated, during which time I continued to work at Lowell, summers at first and then around the building as a sub or after school teacher. As I acquired the lexicon—learning for example never to chastise a four-year-old for smacking another but to ask him instead what it was he *needed* from his victim—I saw them more clearly. These, it appeared, were the kids I had envied as a child.

Once while chatting with Lowell alumni I asked them the routine questions one asks older teenagers: what did they and their friends plan on doing after high school? One was headed to the Ivy League but not before writing for the glossy *Washingtonian* and bumping around eastern Europe for half a year; another was off to study on a beach in Britain but only after he self-produced his first CD in the studio he had built in his parents' spare apartment, the only drawback to which was a number of large spiders. This boy's girlfriend, a Georgetown Day School graduate like him, had just published a self-help book for adolescent girls and was off to do relief work in Peru. Imperceptibly at first, but soon with great force, an envy was roused, one that had been dormant—and I thought vanquished—since the day I read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the tenth grade.

After reading Malcolm I knew better than to be jealous of rich people, to want anything rich kids garnered by the sheer luck of being born to their parents. I cultivated a fiery pride at my poverty—never mind that being born poor was as con-

contingent upon unearned genealogy as being christened at Tiffany's. That was a likeness I was not ready to see.

A child of tenements in Langley Park, I grew up in schools amid drug deals and free lunches. Enraged Black men like Malcolm, Eldridge, and Chuck D taught me that this was an enviable position. I had the "spiritual knowledge of hardship." Farrakhan instructed, "Undeserved suffering is redemptive," and I didn't just buy it, I considered it a sacrament. (Indeed, one wealthy girlfriend severed our friendship in part because she felt, fairly I must add, that I thought I was better than everybody because I was poor.) What the rich kids tried to purchase at the mall and watched on MTV was authentically mine. Urban Black culture was just rotating back into fashion at the time, fuming hip-hop replacing the soul child look that had supplanted Motown, which had done in jazz before that.

This self-esteem arrived late, in part due to weight loss and contact lenses, yes, but also from an ordinary need to be heard. As an undergraduate, my classmates would have to take my word about many topics; whatever their politics they had to acquiesce to my authority on poor public schools, on Mobb Deep's, if not Darwin's, survival of the fittest. This of course was relative and I was surely taking liberties—I had never lived in a project, High Point High only endured one shooting about which I knew, and my parents had managed to escape the poverty line (though barely and only because my father worked two fulltime jobs, the hourly wages to one I exceeded as a twenty-year-old working at Lowell). Yet among my college peers my mild indigence allowed me to feel singular dropping references to gang activity in my neighborhood, my father making hot dog curry in the absence of decent meat, my teenaged brother carrying a handgun, our house being robbed twice. Overriding it all was the plain fact that I was there at the university at all only because I had received a full ride. What had once been a mortification to disguise and elide, was now my signature stance. Poverty was leverage.

This pride was dethroned, the coup launched by those casual conversations with Lowell alumni, I think. Returning to Lowell after grad school, renewed proximity unearthed a

long forgotten, pre-Malcolm identity. Education had landed me in purgatory: I was no longer the unamalgamated resident of poverty. Though my financial identity was the same, my cultural identity belonged elsewhere, in academia, the pasty tower. I wouldn't be a cheapskate grad student forever; soon I'd be leaving that class identity behind.

The tension manifested in material things. My new car, a hardly used Nissan, to me now drove like a clunker. The three-pack tee shirts I had proudly worn as a testimony to how little I cared about fashion, made me slouch. Road trips across the US in rented cars embarrassed me. What were they beside backpacks in Europe, visits to daddy's friends in private villas, summers in Argentina?

Suddenly, I felt as I did as a child. They—those with luxurious pastimes and big back yards—appeared taller, thinner, more fun to be around. Perhaps they were. They seemed sensibly happier, an ease that was unlike the cheeriness I saw in ditches in third world countries, which was a joyousness that only confused me. The envy, ancient, returned—only now I did not have elaborate pipe dreams of penetrating their world in adulthood, nor did I have the psychic sense of superiority Malcolm had given me. As an adult, I had only crippling jealousy, virulent in its recidivism.

Private school was a brief fantasy I had had as a child. It seemed the only way to escape my monstrous family and their indigence. I believed that at private school I could wow my peers with the strength of my personality. I would live by safe, green lawns. I could freely date boys. My parents, sad and violently disappointed people, would disappear, turning up only to express their pride at school functions where I would show them off as testimonies to the extent of my achievements. Look how far Alis has come, they would announce by their very existence. I was ready to remember them lovingly from afar every year of my youth that I remained cramped beside them in our tiny, yelling house.

The idea of private schools sprouted when my brother's best friends, sons of Nigerian schoolteachers, dodged the riotous landscape of Langley Park by acing the SSAT. Chin

and Odom both earned scholarships to the mythic Deerfield Academy, forever famous to me as one of the northeastern daydreams in Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*. When I approached junior high, Deerfield was set to admit its first class of female students. It felt like a meteoric coincidence. I thought for sure that I was in. This, I decided, was how my special talents (of which I had been convinced by the tiniest of victories) would be revealed. As it is for most children of that age, destiny had not yet been erased from my sense of possibility. I felt I was meant to be. I stopped playing outside to practice giving PBS interviews on my difficult childhood. I plotted how Appa could get the money for the requirements of a dormitory. I just knew all my suffering was leading up to this. I sobbed maudlin tears as I envisioned our goodbyes. I knew it was for the best.

Predictably, I was unprepared for the SSAT. This was an exam for which most prep school kids, well, *prepped*. Even Lowell, a school resolutely cautious with academic pressure, ensured their students were ready for the test. In fact, it was the only test about which Lowell students worried. I, on the other hand, had done nothing but arrange for my father to drive me to the test site.

Applying to private school was my poorly formed adolescent idea, not the culmination of years of parental forethought. My immigrant parents knew only how to encourage me with axioms—"if you study you can do"—they had zero to offer in practical help. For them, getting A's was a panacea—the universe of Deerfields and Lowells was alien—and I didn't know how much better equipped the students with whom I was competing would be. I had assumed that this test was a test for which you didn't study. However I answered, I innocently presumed, some secret matrix within the test would register my genius. It didn't occur to me that I might do badly on this test. After all, I was smart. What else was there?

My scores weren't terrible but I suspected they were insufficient—although hindsight makes me wonder how bad they were. I am reminded of how I failed to apply to Ivy schools as a high school senior, harnessed by a prohibitive sense of class I didn't even feel, though later I would discover my scores and

transcripts would have been competitive. At any rate I didn't waste ink applying to Deerfield. It was my first reality check: certainty—like the kind I felt because I fantasized so much of this one thing—was uncertain. I returned home, to a neighborhood soon to be overrun by the gang MS-13, and temporarily gave up.

Dreams can go underground after all, if they don't chalk out all together. One year after Chin left for Massachusetts we moved from one hood to a soon-to-be hood with failing schools. My brother went from chasing 4.0's with Chin to flunking classes and making jokes with a crowd of dealers. Ignored by a school system that tracked students in a triage attempt to save at least a handful while writing off the rest, my brother capitulated to all the regular failings. He felt outcast from success; a peek into any honors classroom would reveal well-dressed middle class kids—mostly white—who were the minority at Bucklodge Middle. The smart kids, it turned out, were the smattering of students who were either white or not poor and more often than not, both.

The discrepancy was more pronounced at High Point High where an even more miniscule minority of middle class students—here again disproportionately white—dominated the classes with the most dynamic teachers, the newest computer labs, the skimpy best that High Point could offer. We were isolated from the herd (I say we because, unlike my Sri-Lankan born brother who was athletic, thuggishly handsome and ethnically ambiguous, I managed to infiltrate the fortunate bunch with my native English and my bespectacled, conventionally nerdy Indian look).

Frances Lefkowitz, an Ivy League grad from a government cheese childhood, writes elegantly about the sanction childhood poverty can impose, the exclusion it causes that can often lead you to don a dozen disguises to circumvent it. "Poverty becomes you," she writes. "It gets inside you, nestles in your bones and gives you a chill you cannot shake."² Poverty

² Frances Leflowitz, "The Gifted Classes," Sun Magazine (Jan 2003), 17.

informed every pore of my identity, from the toughness I wore wore post-Malcolm to the defensiveness of my adulthood and especially the secretive self of my childhood, when I had no sophisticated standpoint behind which to hide. Back then it wasn't my postmodern ruminating that revealed me, but events, unscripted and unannounced, that would leave me naked as myself: a kid whose parents had no money.

Lefkowitz tells of the horrifying moment when, home ill on her thirteenth birthday, her wealthy friends march into her dingy one-room apartment to surprise her with gifts and cake. She wonders if she ever had them fully fooled, though now whatever veil she had erected was irrevocably dissolved.

I am reminded of the day my sixth grade teacher showed up unexpectedly at my house with get well cards and stuffed animals after I had been bedded by pneumonia. Like Lefkowitz I was terrorized by the thought of being exposed by my house packed with the leftover Holiday Inn furniture my father carted home, stained carpeting, and mismatched knickknacks that coordinated only in their cheap awfulness. Our walls were splattered with food from epic family fights, all sorts of miscellaneous items littered the floor and grimy table tops. Lefkowitz was braver than I however; while my mother cleared a place on the plastic-covered sofa for Mrs. Humphrey, I shut myself in the bedroom I shared with my mother and refused to come out. It was the first stand I ever took.

It wasn't the mess or the smallness of which I was ashamed as much as the displacement I didn't want to face. The world I saw beyond my house—on television mostly but also during visits with white friends who had not yet moved out of Adelphi—ravaged my sense of belonging, not only to that comfortable world of allowances and sleepovers, but to the calculus of the universe itself. I felt cheated. Why was I over here, when I wanted so badly to be over there? I could fit so easily there, I thought as I stitched Guess labels onto my no-name jeans, as I saved lunch money for thirty-dollar sweatshirts from the Gap, as I prayed no one I knew would see the beat-up Datsun my father drove. Yet I had been thwarted. Serendipity had skipped me. I could not believe in justice. In fact, it was this childish,

pouting state of mind that readied me for Malcolm, ripened me for atheism, and prepared me to sympathize with ill-fated third world fury: the world wasn't just. Lefkowitz remarks that what was absent in her was profoundly present in her wealthy pals: they had "faith in the rightness of the world and their place in it." What could be more empowering? What could lay a more sturdy groundwork for ambition? For dreams?

In college I worked in one of the worst public school systems in the nation: Baltimore City Public Schools, famed in the '90s mostly for the fraction of dollars it spent per child when compared to neighboring districts, even the disintegrating county in which I had graduated. All the disasters of Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* manifested in actual dingy classrooms, aged textbooks and real smiling brown-skinned children.

Once, in hopes of prompting fifth graders to write in their journals, I asked: Why hasn't there been a Black president? I expected venomous tirades about The Man and maybe even a defiant aspiration by a few to become the first. Glancing through them as I collected the notebooks, I was satisfied by their lengthy responses. A single sentence was often the most many of these kids would or could write, yet today I noticed their painful scrawls had stretched nearly into paragraphs. I congratulated myself. Malcolm would be proud.

Later I read the journals, sparkly happy face stickers in hand.

Black people are not smart in enough.

The job is too complicated for Black people.

Black people don't do good in court.

Black people are lazier.

How self-indulgent my pity party turned out to be! While my dreams had been submerged, I had had at least the self-esteem to concoct them before letting them go. The cultural capital of being South Asian amidst Blacks and Latinos had permitted me to believe that I could compete and to trust that it was *circumstance* that prevented me from entering the race. I did not doubt myself. I did not doubt those around me who looked, spoke and acted like me. I did not doubt my father,

who I knew had the inborn talent and industriousness to be an engineer. It was the unjust landscape *alone* that blockaded him from his rightful destiny. That was the culprit, I knew. Yet here in Baltimore, where every student was unquestionably destitute, at the farthest end of unforgivable, criminally feeble education, there was no indignation at the unfairness of the game. Instead of accusing fingers, there was indictment. It's our fault, those dark-skinned kids knew. There were no dreams to drown.

And dreams are key. At Lowell one of the thematic frameworks for the transition from pre-primary to kindergarten is Hopes and Dreams. Throughout the first six weeks of school, five-year-olds are asked what their dreams are and what they hope to achieve. Part of this process materializes in numerous self-portraits. They start out on 8x11 paper and gradually become larger and more involved, each step outlined in felt pen, coated with watercolors, laminated and captioned. The children are decidedly self-conscious. They are encouraged to assess themselves and to create identities. They are instructed to consider these identities in terms of their future accomplishments, the eventual realization of their dreams. Lowell is an independent school, known more for its emotional atmosphere than scholastics. The children study Romare Bearden and Andy Warhol for weeks at a time and sing nearly every day. It is a roseate place to conduct childhood.

I don't mean to say that Lowell will lead to certain psychic health or that more traditional private schools will deliver material success. Private school, whatever its breed, is no more a guarantor of well-being than braces, family vacations or piano lessons, but shrewd parents provide them when they can. Like much of what money can buy, what this type of education supplies is an edge, yes, but also a peace of mind. In the theoretical world of Horace Mann and the American ethic, a good education is the level playing field; what you accomplish or fail to accomplish thereafter is somewhat your doing.

In one sense, you never have to ask, what would I have done with a better opportunity? How would the contest for applause have played out differently had I been armed with a more potent preparation? With a good education one can,

assess one's failures and triumphs as evidence of one's abilities without wondering too much about unfair circumstances. Bullies, crooked teeth and bad parenting aside, one's life rests on one's shoulders. Good education promotes a healthy culpability.

Barbara Ehrenreich, champion of the working poor, remarked: in life, as in physics, starting conditions are everything. This is perhaps hyperbolic and at worst, confining. Perhaps it doesn't celebrate enough the industriousness of the poor, perhaps it makes too much of circumstance. Escape is more than possible after all, countless American stories point to that, Malcolm included.

Yet poverty remains even after you escape it. Though a dissoluble noose, the imprint remains. I have owned my own home, I have loan-free degrees galore, I am middle class now. Yet I will forever wonder what more I could have done had I not been saddled with the handicap of crappy schools and had I not always been ruled by money when choosing schools and programs and scholarships and ultimately even my goals. Like Brando in *On the Waterfront*, I live partially in a fantasy life (oh, the liberation of "I coulda been..."). I will always wonder what more might have been had I not been encumbered by what also made me who I am. Poverty is me; it played an integral role in both my success and disappointment. What I achieve will always be built upon my childhood poverty *and* be forever colored by the possibility of more, what could have been without that poverty, now forever out of reach.

Yet the most treacherous consequence of poverty is not this irritating, perpetual wondering what if, or the ugly arrogance of viewing myself as having survived, nor is it the netherworld of straddling the class I escaped and the class to which I ran. It is the permanence of excuse. For me there will always be a sense of freedom from full accountability. When I am turned down for a fellowship, when I examine my anorexic paycheck, when I receive yet another rejection slip from a nearly anonymous magazine, a part of me cannot resist ascribing some of the liability to my beginnings. "Starting conditions are everything," I cheaply console myself. It is irresistible. In this rabidly

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classless society, poverty—at least for those who are fugitive from it—can be a nasty crutch. Never mind what disasters it wreaks on the bulk of the poor: those who never escape.