

Enlightened

Jinhee Park

I don't know what it was about Orla, but I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. It was something about the way she was so eloquently outspoken, and brazenly savvy. The way her walk was half-dance, half-glide, and the way her clothes were always perfectly worn in. She had this “cool-kid” quality that I couldn't quite place my finger on.

We sat next to each other in Mr. Smith's 10th grade chemistry class. She later told me that she once thought I was a quiet little Asian girl and that she had never been more wrong in her life. I always laughed the hardest at her snide remarks about chemistry and we bonded over the uselessness of it. I realized our love for similar music when she had accidentally dropped her CD player and the latest Interpol album had fallen out. While I was fairly new to bands like the Velvet Underground and the Beatles, she was already familiar with lesser-known bands like the Pixies and Pavement. Pretty soon, we became inseparable.

Orla took me to places in the city that would have been otherwise untouched by me, and naturally I experienced a lot of firsts with her. I went to my first small concert at Hammerstein Ballroom with her. Interpol was touring for the release of their second album and she had gotten us tickets for my 16th birthday. Nothing can describe the feeling of being pushed up against the stage as the crowd moved with the music and the complete silence between each song that we used to absorb every wave of sound that had traveled throughout our bodies from our soul to our fingertips. I coughed my way through my first smoke with her under the bridge. I bought my first pair of Converse with her and got my first eighty-dollar haircut with her in the city. All of these things made me feel as if we were in an exclusive club looking outwards and laughing at the world.

My school doesn't have your typical high school dichotomy of geeks versus jocks. By “typical” I guess I'm referring to Hollywood's depiction of the American high school experience. In Stuyvesant High School, we are all freaks and geeks on some level. Still, there exists a hierarchy of “cool” and invisible boundaries that separate various groups based on talent, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this very complex world of high school society, Orla belonged to the highest caste-she was beautiful, endowed with creative talents and bisexual ... she was cool. Sometimes I wished to be like Orla. Not in a creepy, “Single White Female” way but at times I caught myself emulating her mannerisms of sarcasm and wit.

Orla and I came from different worlds. I was a fairly quiet kid from Queens. Her parents worked in theater and lived in SoHo. My immigrant father worked for a distribution company in the garment district. It's a relatively short walking distance from Orla's place to my father's office, but in terms of social worlds, it was very far, indeed. Orla had grown up surrounded by the arts and dance while I was always encouraged to do well in school before seeking things that were deemed irrelevant by my mother.

One day, we were in health class discussing stereotypes, not really acknowledging that we ourselves were fully entrenched in generalizations and assumptions about one another. The class discussion turned to gay stereotypes. A student expressed his surprise at how most gay people he had met were “unpretentious.” I thought about how much the kids in my school loved to throw that word around – “pretentious.”

Without thinking, I mumbled – “Are gay people *pretentious*?” What I meant was: Why the surprise that gay people are unpretentious?

“What?”

Orla turned around to face me. Her wide blue eyes narrowed a little, and she lifted the

corners of her mouth, trying to give me the benefit of the doubt that she had not heard me correctly. I knew I had made a mistake.

“Never mind.”

“No, what did you say?”

I studied her perfect blonde curls, wishing to be anywhere but there. I repeated myself. A blank stare from her for a split second, and then, “Are gay people pretentious?!? What the fuck, that's like saying uh ‘Are Asian people smart??’ Jeez.”

Orla rolled her eyes as she spun around to face the front of the classroom. I felt as if I had just been slapped across the face. I wasn't sure what she meant by that analogy, but I was at a loss for words and I didn't make an attempt to correct the misunderstanding.

After that, there was a gradual fallout between us. We slowly stopped hanging out and eating lunch together. It even came to a point where it was too embarrassing to even pretend that nothing had happened. I started to hang out more often with Audrey, Lily and Tamara, all girls whom I had met through Orla. As we got closer, I realized that I wasn't the only one who had felt this way about Orla. It seemed as though she burned a lot of bridges behind her. At first, I felt as if I had fallen from grace because of one small misinterpretation. Then I felt a sense of loss - not only of a friend but also the connection to all that she represented. At the same time, I was genuinely puzzled by how quickly and easily Orla was able to dismiss me without any real attempt to understand what I meant. It was ironic how her “openness” and “liberal views” had limits. Orla was very confident and secure in her idiosyncratic ways, but was intolerant of other people's shortcomings, whether real or perceived.

There's a part of me that misses Orla's friendship, but I want relationships in which I can be free to ask questions and challenge assumptions - even when they might hinder people's

perceptions of me. I learned to value my own insights while being receptive to what others may have to offer. It's not easy, but I think it is important to push boundaries of both my own thinking as well as that of others around me. I suppose the Shins say it very well when they sing: *We could have been so good-natured if I'd relented when you insisted, but we've been backed against all nature's walls far too long.*