

The Other

“Don’t look,” someone whispers. “Turn away!” another urges. Some don’t say anything, instead their eyes are far-off and unseeing. Sometimes, those are the ones that hurt most. But it’s okay, I think as I spin on my heel and evade the whispers by my locker. It’s like a game, you see, and one I’ve played my whole life.

I’m invisible to them. I parade around in their schools and in their stores and at their places of work, but no one sees me, not really. They see a wisp of a shade, some even less. I am the afterthought’s afterthought, less substantial than the memory of a fleeting summer breeze. Or why else would they speak as they do?

“There’s too many of Them,” someone grouses. “I wish They’d make a life for themselves, instead of sitting at home all day, the lazy bums,” another laments. Some don’t bother to complain, instead their ears are buzzing and their vacant heads are bobbing to melodies only they can hear. Sometimes, those are the ones that hurt most. It’s a silly game, I think on my walk home from school. Someone glances in my direction. For once though, they take a second look before they turn back and continue to grumble.

It’s a strange sensation. Being seen. It means I’m no longer invisible. That night, when my homework is done and my bone-tired family comes home from their endless shifts, I look for a job. “Why?” one of them asks. I only shrug.

“They’re too different,” someone argues. “Why don’t They act more like us?” another insists. Some pay no mind, thinking only of their own lives in their own worlds. Sometimes, those are the ones that hurt most. Good thing it’s only a game, I deem breezily on my way past the neighbourhood café.

I stroll up to desk of the business I’d applied to, visibly bouncing. The man standing behind it has his back turned. “Excuse me,” I politely offer, “I’m here for a job? I was interviewed over the phone.”

“Ah!” the man exclaims. He shuffles around at a snail’s pace, precariously balancing a stack of papers, “Yes, yes, with the lovely voice. Wonderful. Perfe-” He stops mid-sentence when he spies my appearance; the papers scattering out his arms like a school of fish dispersing. The man recoils as if he’s found a snake in place of his coffee cup, blue eyes flicking to my covered head and back down to the bronze skin of my outstretched hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize before but I believe you’re not quite who we’d like as the face of our company,” he looks almost apologetic, “we’re looking for someone less... unique?” The man’s lame excuse hangs in the air like a dead weight. I swallow my reply and walk back home with a forced smile. The next day, if anyone

notices the hair hanging loose on my shoulders, or the garish amounts of pale makeup spattered on my face, they say nothing.

“I bet They don’t even love this country,” someone insists. “They don’t belong here, They should just go back,” another declares. Some merely listen and tilt their heads, disinterested. Sometimes, those are the ones that hurt most. It’s just a game, I tell myself, as I continue to march on past. But I’m no longer so sure.

At the store I buy t-shirts with slogans and flags. *I* love this country, I think; it’s where I was born and raised, it’s my *home*, even if it’s not Their’s. Before I go to bed that night, I watch a game with the rest of my family, and the neighbours too. All of us is clad in the colours of our hometown team as we wildly cheer them on, just as we’ve always done.

“We should get rid of Them,” someone plots. “This place is ours, not Their’s!” another asserts. Some don’t utter a word, instead, they furrow their brows, but their lips remain ever-silent. Sometimes those are the ones that hurt most. No matter, I tell myself as the grocery store cashier sneers too close than is comfortable, their breath reeking and eyes alight with a manic sort of flame. It’s only a game?

That night a group of boys hurl insults as I traverse the last few hundred feet to my door. I’m tempted to tell them they’re wrong. I’m not one of Them, I reflect darkly. I’m not. I refuse to even entertain the idea. My sleep is interrupted around midnight when I wake to a soft thudding at the window. In the morning, before making my way to school, I help my family scrub the dried eggs from the façade of the house.

“I hate Them!” someone bellows. “I hate Them more!” another roars. Some don’t yell whatsoever, instead they stand motionless, watching. Sometimes, those are the ones that hurt most. One of the rioters in the square grabs me by the arm on my walk home from school and begins to spew fiery hatred in my face.

I am exposed and painted and garbed in the same flag they’re waving about. The sound of my voice falls no differently on the ears than their own. But my name and my face and the colour of my skin make me different. I am one of Them. I must be alienated. I am an Other. I want to holler at the top of my lungs and tell the mob how my family and my neighbours and myself are no different than the people gathered here. How there is no Us and no Them. I want to scream out all the thousand ways we are all the same; how we mean no harm, my people. But before I can choke a word in edgewise, someone knocks a bony elbow to my face and the taste of blood fills my mouth. In that moment I realize once and for all this is not a game.

It never was.