

### On Why I Got Kicked out of the Girl Scouts

The scouts, a trio, are blonde, freckled, their pre-pubescent evident from the awkward way in which their respective knees are knotted into each other, into the strong yet vulnerable physics of a teepee—a structure from which my body never evolved. They serve boxed cookies to an old woman in front of me with smiles, chatter about how peanut butter soothes the soul or some other mawkish, Thomas Kinkadean sentiment.

I wait behind her at a civilized distance, but as this gaggle of women continues to squawk about how “cookie time only comes once a year,” and “oh! a merit badge for teamwork!,” I edge closer, into uncomfortable third-world proximity. The old lady senses me in the space that you can feel more than see, and glancing at me over her shoulder, she clears out with her boxes of those hackneyed thin mints. Cookies are not fucking meant to be frozen.

It is my turn. Wordless, the Girl Scouts squint up at me as I do down at them. Their mothers, two, are laconic. They do not speak until I’ve handed them my money and helped myself to two boxes of Samoas. Then, suddenly, “Thank you for supporting the Girl Scouts!”

“Uh huh,” I say and give the girls the eye that stinks.

On my walk home, I look to one of the cookie boxes, first ignoring the nutrition information then reading the mission statement on the opposite face. The Girl Scouts organization, the box proclaims, allows “young women [to] discover their potential connect with others and take action in their communities and the world.” I recall my experiences with the Brownies, the precursor to Girl Scouts, and remember nothing but public humiliation in the fog of hot glue stink. To this day, I haven’t the slightest idea as to how watching the adult supervisor use a hot glue gun to construct a house made of popsicle sticks is any significant contribution to the world or young women’s place within it.

Having been suspended between the two groups that dominated my elementary school in the port city of San Pedro, California—the white girls from the hills and the Mexican girls from the numbered streets—I begged my mother to support my enlistment into the troop that I hoped would elevate me in the world of stratified lunch tables and the more complex social geography of the recess blacktop that was

divided, appropriately, by lines in yellow and white. Despite her protestations about the cost of uniforms, my mother, overworked from parenting me and caring for bedpan-flinging patients at the hospital where she interned as a nursing school student, conceded in hopes of keeping me occupied and less alone than I usually was with books and the dolls on which I had bestowed odd problems like leprosy and sex addiction.

I was ejected from the Brownies for a variety of reasons. The first problem they found was my failure to wear the uniform. I'd like to testify that, at eight years old, I was a politicized self whose refusal to wear the uniform had purpose. The best lie I created for myself is that I didn't wear the two-toned uniform because it mirrored those worn by the females belonging to the North Vietnamese communist party whose regime my mother had fled. Or, after I take a postcolonial theory class in college, I tell myself I didn't wear all that brown because I was asserting my biracial subjectivity by insisting to wear mismatched outfits, consciously assembled to consist of a long-sleeved pink Catalina shirt my dad bought me during one of our summer parasailing trips that tanned me, my mother said, so brown it made me ugly; a t-shirt with Beast from the Disney version of the French fairy tale because I identified with It much more than the Beauty character; purple stretch pants whose stirrups hugged my arches unsupported by the cheap black-and-white saddle shoes that slapped a rhythm capable of transporting me from 1980s San Pedro to some nameless 1950s American town where black and white were quaint divides.

My present self, though, must belie the precociousness and militancy I attempt to grant the eight-year-old me to justify my subversion of the Brownie code. These justifications operate under the assumption that these racial, class-based injustices are my burden to bear, as if the memories of Việt Nam and the struggle of a divided self born in the diaspora actually belong to me.

The truth is that the skort was just too tight around the waist for my round belly, my sash too sparse, whatever merit badges dotting it too sloppily sewn, and the uniform all too brown—it matched my freckles and erased my skin. The troop leader first asked questions so that all of the blonde ponytail-swinging heads would turn to stare: “Where’s your uniform?” and “So you’ve decided to not be a Brownie today? Hmph.” I tucked away the troop leader’s disciplinary letters to

my mother in my Sweet Valley High and Mark Twain books. The subsequent phone calls home only angered my mother during weeks when money was particularly tight; she was not concerned about my not belonging, but only frustrated that she had spent the money on an unworn uniform. So, I wore the skort at home as I attempted Olympian gymnastics moves on arms of chairs and ends of the coffee table, and my mother felt her American consumer satisfaction fulfilled, doubly so as my younger sister went through a vintage brown skort period years later.

It was, however, coffeecake that finalized my exile. My mother, having grown up in third-world poverty, admires, desires, and seeks sugar-laden foods, twice as intensely as she renounces the American gluttony, extravagance, and imperialism producing the sweets that still to this day wink, pucker, and coo at me from grocery store shelves like Vietnamese hookers from nightclub doorways. So, though our apartment was rendered austere by my mother's financial struggles, our kitchen was reliably equipped with sweets—the one in question being the six-pack of coffeecakes baked exclusively by the now defunct Lucky's supermarket. These cakes were soft from the drizzled icing, yet crunchy from the sprinkled clumps of brown sugar and walnuts—stickily clinging to one another, yet individual entities: islands. These cakes were perfect for breakfast, easy and quick to eat. My mother and I were always in a rush in the mornings. She would let me stay up past my bedtime to watch shows like *90210* with her, feigning disapproval by clicking her tongue when she looked at the clock at every commercial break, but I know she was eager for my company. So I would wake up late and exhausted in the mornings, rolling over to find my mother in the same state.

One morning, a Lucky's coffeecake wadded into the inside of my cheek, I rushed to finish homework that I had foregone in opting to, at my mother's side, watch the latest developments in the Brenda-Dylan saga. Chewing, I scribbled sentences, contextualizing each of my twenty spelling words in about six minutes. My mother stood by my side and watched what she considers a redoubtable feat that she still speaks of to this day when someone inquires about what her oldest daughter is "doing these days." It is my effortlessness with the English language that has been the primary source of

both my mother's admiration and resentment of me. Our relationship has never been defined by any purity.

And it was with the taste of coffeecake still lingering on my breath, even after a greasy school lunch purchased with the meal tickets that put me in line with all of the Mexican and Black students, that I went to my weekly afterschool Brownie meeting. One of the subjects of discussion for that particular meeting was some privileged white middle-class lesson on nutrition, based, of course, on the government-constructed food pyramid, a hierarchy alien to my mother, who was kept alive in her childhood in Việt Nam by cans of sweetened condensed milk and white rice. The lesson entailed asking each Brownie what she had had for breakfast and an ensuing discussion about what was nutritional about it.

Answers circled the room around me—oatmeal, cornflakes, orange juice, wheat toast, yogurt, and some fucking second grader had the temerity to announce, “assorted melon”—so, as I waited for the troop leader to call on me, my excitement swelled. I was finally going to have the opportunity to rub in their clean faces the sticky sweetness of the coffeecakes my mom was cool enough to buy me for breakfast. These girls would finally long for my life as I secretly had for theirs.

The troop leader turned her head to me where I sat on the outside of the circle. “And, Jade, what did you have for breakfast this morning as you were not putting on your Brownie uniform?” A couple of the girls snickered, and I straightened my habitual slouch to proudly declare, “Coffeecake!”

The Greek chorus erupted in unison, informing the illiterate masses that the villain had stabbed herself after all. The Brownies kept laughing, and the troop leader laughed too, composing herself only long enough to say, “That’s not a breakfast” and point to the fats and sugars peak of the food pyramid. I shrank from the circle, from the periphery I already inhabited. I was immediately ashamed, reminded that I was only a child. The troop leader moved on to demonstrate the next craft assignment—a cotton ball Easter bunny with Chiclet teeth. As she explained the importance of placing the googly eyes just right, I confronted the memories I had tried to ignore: my classmates’ wrinkled noses as I unwrapped a pork liver pâté sandwich from Lee’s; my gradual exclusion from the white girls’ jump rope games as I spent more time with a

Black-Lebanese girl from the afterschool latchkey program; and the one time, just weeks prior, that a tall Black sixth-grader had mowed me over on her way from the lunch tables to a tetherball match, leaving me on the ground with scraped, bloody elbows and tater tots and ketchup smeared across my shirt, and the PTA moms who worked as lunch ladies merely watched, from ten feet away, as I brushed myself off and walked to the nurse's office.

I should have known that coffeecake could not undo all of those events that defined who I was in the world of school, but I am more ashamed to admit that the coffeecake incident made me resent my mother for far too many years, that in so doing the Brownies left me completely alone.

But, in looking back at the incident now, I can understand more about how and why I love my mother. Those Girl Scouts-in-training heckled my coffeecake breakfasts, the "disadvantaged" status and sloppy parenting that the sweets represented to them. Some of these girls did the same when one of the ape-looking PTA moms openly criticized my mother for not helping out with preparing and serving food at classroom parties, for "being poor," she'd told me in front of a table full of wide-eyed, snickering classmates. This ape-woman and her squeaking chimp minions could not comprehend that the mother-daughter relationship I knew was not one of servant-master as it was for many of the Brownies. *Their* mothers served them individual plates of dinner at night, bought them Lunchables and fun-sized this and that for their insulated lunchboxes, baked them cupcakes on their birthdays and brought them to school to serve children, one by one.

Though my mother tried, when she could, to make ham or sweetened condensed milk sandwiches in a brown bag for me, our food relationship was more reciprocal. When I pulled the lilipads of beef from my bowl of phở, I placed them floating on her broth; when she cut up a piece of steak on a plate of rice, I wiped the crust forming at the spout of the soy sauce bottle; when she stood at the stove stirring soup, I read to her from a ring of her nursing school flashcards so that she could better remember the body and its illnesses; when she pushed a bowl toward me and promised, "If you eat this all, I will love you," I ate long after I was full. These laughing Brownie faces did not understand that food was, for my mother and I, a private matter, that the way we ate side-by-

side at the coffee table every night was not a public display, but how, together, we survived our alienation.

When I open the first box of Samoas. I pull out one cookie and study its reef of coconut toasted brown, dark lines of chocolate drizzled across it like prison bars. The chocolate beginning to melt into my fingertips, I recall an image of my mother, fierce but lovely—she squats low to the ground, hair draping over her shoulders, and slings a hammer into the tough husk of a fresh coconut, its milk sweet on her lips, then mine. I squint through the Samoa's empty center, then fill my mouth with the memories the Girl Scouts have sold me.