

Ripples

When water drops off the end of an icicle and lands gently below, it joins the puddle so effortlessly, shapelessly, that you can't identify that single drop from the rest that came before it, nor those that drop down after it. It has become invisible.

This ability to blend in, to become invisible-- like a drop of water-- is enviable. Maybe because I was raised in a mostly white community with my brown, almond eyes and thick, straight hair--like a stain on a sheet of white. The racism and ignorance I encountered as a child prepared me little for how to be an adult. How do you play the hand you were given? I can be like my sister and defy it with the same hatred and rage; her righteousness screaming like a red-faced preacher drawing lines on who is right--who is wrong. Or I can stand by, a silent witness, making sure I haven't created any waves as to cause the tide to turn. How do you create understanding without raising a tsunami of defensiveness?

I know if I walk into a restaurant with all of my rowdy friends, I will be the one remembered. I know if I walk into a high-end boutique, I am the one likely to be "attended" to. I know when I walk into a work meeting, and I'm tired and hang my head, it will get noticed.

When my work made it a priority to hire more people of color and emphasized this initiative to Every. Single. Employee. I applauded with apprehension. It was the same year I was recognized for my accomplishments in front of all my colleagues. A *positive* way to stand out. Except when your achievements *could* be questioned because of this hiring initiative, it makes you squirm in your seat. In one swift swoop they've muddied the water. I was raised with the debate of affirmative action swirling around me. As a child, I didn't know what it meant, but I had a feeling it was bad. Those who don't know me might say I was only recognized because of my race, not my merit. And to me, that would be worse than not being recognized at all. Then being invisible. Forget that this policy could be a positive agent of change for women and minorities for opportunities they've previously been excluded from.

When I was a teenager, I walked into an art gallery in my hometown. The old woman greeted me and proceeded to ask where I was from. "I'm from here."

"No, where are you from?" she countered.

"Oh, I was adopted, but I've lived here my whole life."

"Are you a foreign exchange student?" she questioned. "Your English is so good. What country are you visiting from?" I was sixteen years old and this polite old lady was insulting me with every question she asked. Another backhanded compliment. Hard to recognize but makes you feel like dirt.

My father recently asked me if I thought we could create a country where equity was possible. He is a 75-year-old, white, upper-middle class, Republican man. He has been educating himself on equity and race relations. He is an intellectual, although he doesn't necessarily believe and agree with all he is reading. He is working hard because he has four out of five children adopted from around the world--races that aren't his. Six out of eight grandchildren--races that aren't his. Six grandsons who will grow up and have the world afraid of them.

"No" I said. "Not in our lifetime. Every single minority has had their turn being ostracized in this country. Blacks, women, Asians, Mexicans, Latinos, Muslims, LGBTQ groups. Why would those who this system benefits want this system to change?" He nodded his head.

But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try. It is Such. Hard. Work. I probably won't see it in my life time. My children might. My grandchildren may. And I'll be honest: the hard work isn't being done by a majority of my friends. I try to find a way to enjoy their friendship without having my feelings hurt. Because how do you *not* support these beliefs but still support me?

My neighbors say they are tired of the protests. They are tired of the politics. I can't help but agree. I am tired too. I am tired of the water rushing over me, leaving me gasping for air. Making me afraid I might drown.

My own sons--the drops that come after me. They remind me of what I've forgotten: each drop that drips off the end of an icicle does more than just blend in. It touches and moves every drop of water that came before it, creating a ripple. Drip by drip.