

A Secret Diary

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I

Everybody knows that the entire process of going through middle school and high school is a tough one. If you can survive that, you are a winner. Being a thirteen-year old international student in a very American middle school was not easy. I must say first, however, that I was always different from those around me, no matter where I was. In Azerbaijan I was the girl whose mother and sister were in America, and that was a big deal. Actually, an Azerbaijani living in America still is a big deal for anyone living in Azerbaijan or for any “lucky” Azeri in America. My old friends and strangers who add me through their friends on social networking websites due to their fascination with New York, are very jealous of my escaping Azerbaijan.

Back in Azerbaijan everyone knew that I would move to New York eventually because my mom and sister were here already. For almost four years of my life I was without my mother, but even though she wasn't physically by my side, she sent me parcels with clothes from Children's Place every season. In Azerbaijan we don't have clothes like that, especially summer clothes. Therefore when I wore skirts, shorts, dresses or especially crop tops, it drew a lot of negative attention from the neighbors. Jealousy formed in many children's and mothers' eyes and I was severely judged and even bullied. With next door neighbors having something to gossip about in the evening, or with other neighbors listening to my conversations with my crushes, I became so angry I began to fight physically with boys who got me to the point where I was fed up with listening to their nasty talk and constant name-calling. When I fought them, I was labeled a very aggressive girl—they said my father should take better care of me. Eyes were always on me. I hated being discriminated against. As much as I loved attention, this was not the right kind of attention. On top of everything, I had always been a bubbly, happy, loving girl— which no one likes in Azerbaijan, especially in the more conservative neighborhoods. I was considered a rebel. As I said, due to my clothes, but also because of my personality, I was discriminated against. Azerbaijani people believe females have to be “classy” and quiet. They have to be pure and sit at home doing what a woman should be doing. Yes, even the little girls.

I was somewhere between the ages of nine and twelve, so you would think that these rules wouldn't apply. But they did. So much pressure was on me to be a shy, quiet girl who behaves the way society wants her to. Even my math teacher, who was also my homeroom teacher, told me to put a button in a sock every time someone made me mad. So instead of fighting the boys both physically and verbally, I would just put another button in a sock. After three years of fighting the society I was born in, I gave up after being humiliated in front of my first-ever

young love. He made me feel terrible about myself for being friends with, and having a conversation with, a neighbor boy. I was crying so hard I fainted in the middle of the street. And in Azerbaijan everyone is always hanging out in an area where about six buildings face each other. Everyone knew one another, so my fainting and being humiliated was a big deal. After this incident I became like a robot. I refused to talk to anyone, did not laugh at all, all I wanted was to go to school and come back home and that's it. I finally started to act the way they wanted me to. I noticed the difference in the way people spoke to me because they noticed a change in me. I could feel that they thought I was behaving strange all of a sudden, but they were satisfied with the way I was acting. I felt like a flower that had been trampled by a horse.

Nonetheless, I started to gain respect from people or, should I say, I started to be accepted, and this was at twelve years old. What really bothered me throughout the whole time of being discriminated against was that the neighbors and their kids knew that I was a good girl, but they were all jealous of my mother being in America, my clothes, and the future they knew I would have. After I finally got used to the fact that I had to watch myself in everything I did and make sure never to stand out, my father brought amazing news to me. I was finally going to escape this prison of identity, and reunite with my mom and sister in a beautiful democratic country. Little did I know America was going to be another place where I was going to be discriminated against.

II

I spoke absolutely no English and right away was put into a very American middle school, Wagner Middle School in Manhattan. Again, everyone was interested in knowing who I was, and where I was from. Because I spoke no English, eventually people started to make fun of me, calling me a terrorist and making fun of my English whenever I did try to speak. I was always quiet and got all A's and B's for effort and the attention I gave to the teacher, unlike the very open and crazy kids in America. This is the time where my bubbly personality in Azerbaijan all those years would help me make some friends and was actually acceptable. As I started to be able to communicate, I could show people that I wasn't just some immigrant from a weird country no one had ever heard of. By the time high school came along I was back to my own self, a better, stronger self. I didn't get offended by people trying to insult me, I dressed as I pleased, spoke as I pleased and, most of all, I could finally be as bubbly, crazy, and energetic as I always was.

Going through bullying and prejudice from my own people in Azerbaijan and then facing a completely different society in America helped me create a strong sense of individuality and personality, and I would never trade those experiences for anything.

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