

Brown Girls Dating White Boys With Money

By

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I'm listening to Daphne Palasi Andreades' *Brown Girls* dating white boys with money and thinking about my ex-boyfriend. Thinking about my ex-boyfriend while wearing his Lululemon sweatpants and Faherty sweater. I have a lot of his clothes. He parts with them easily. As if they're not precious things that he spent weeks deliberating whether they were worth the cost. Or bought on an impulse after saying, "Fuck it! I deserve nice things!" Later, for him to admire the coveted items as they hung in the wardrobe.

I think about my first visit to his aunt's house in Montauk. Ascending the spiral staircase to a third-floor walkway that led across the high-beamed home to a lookout over the ocean horizon. As we took the lit-up stone pathway from the big house to the cottage where we stayed, I thought about how far I've come from what anyone in my family has ever known. How in some way, I have "made it" because my hard work has brought me to be in the same space with a boy who has access to a beachfront house in the Hamptons. And how for him, it's just a casual

weekend getaway to a family home. In his eyes, this property was somehow modest, because there was a time when it was his grandfather's summer home, and it housed nothing but a simple cabin. Before the cabin burned down and his aunt built her house on top of it. Never mind the fact that I'd never actually known anyone who owned a house that they didn't live in year-round. Much less anything associated with the word "cottage."

Yes, just being affiliated with the privileged feels like a privilege. But always a loaned indulgence. A feeling that would wash over me whenever my ex's family were in the throes of their dynamics, as they rattled off New York institutions and references to classic American films that I'd never heard of, despite the fact that my whole family was born here.

Remembering the time when I shared that detail about my family with my ex's father, who responded that I was just American like him. And me thinking, no: I'm American *unlike* you. I'm American like *me*. And then the feeling would return, that I didn't belong there. My role in this space was as an outer extension to be absorbed by an inner circle; invited only to observe and partake in their ways of being. And then I would long for a place of my own. Somewhere I could finally fit the fullness of myself that I otherwise compartmentalized, whether at home or away. Something that I could stand on without the fear of an opposing force pulling it out from under me.

I reflect on the facility in which I am able to navigate these borrowed spaces. Years after learning what a caper was (a flower, right?). After learning that you really should only ever eat a steak cooked medium-rare—or medium, at most. Years of absorbing all the lessons I have gained in my travels to distances that push me further and further away from my origins. Until I can't remember when I started saying "sa-men" instead of "sal-mon". To the point when I'm surprised when my mom asks me at a Brooklyn restaurant near my apartment, "What is Béarnaise sauce?"

And I wonder to myself, when did I surpass my mother in my assumed knowledge about the world, to where she looks to me for guidance?

“Sal-mon.” It’s one of those residual words that nods to my family’s cultural confusion. That’s how it’s pronounced in Spanish, precluding the fact that the majority of us are not fluent in any other language outside of English. Like my family, the “L” is discounted in its anglicized form, yet present in my family’s tongue. Not as an act of defiance or honor towards heritage, more like the vestige of a cultural transfusion that never quite steeped into our conditioning. And a reminder that normal is anything that enough people do around you.

For us, normal was sitting four generations in a car as we headed to the “trift”—another remnant, forging the pronunciation of the “th” sound in “thrift store”. In the backseat is where I would tease my grandmothers to the point that they would turn around and articulate with emphasis “Th-rrr-ift!”, only to add a rolled “R.” Beside me is my mother, who is completely unable to roll her “R’s”; and us together laughing at my grandmas’ inability to pronounce English despite being born in the United States.

All the way up until we reach the Mexican restaurant. Where the two generations who roll their “R’s” converse with the staff with the ease of belonging, while the two generations who don’t, point to the items on the menu for fear of revealing our ignorance. If we don’t say too much, maybe the staff will think we belong too. But we don’t see any glimmer of recognition in the server’s eyes. And we engorge ourselves with chips and salsa to fill the ache that rises from our bellies.

Sometimes, us “No Sabos” say we don’t care about Spanish. Like when I was fourteen and I defied my mother’s directive to take it as my high school foreign-language requirement; scribbling down “French” moments before turning in my school enrollment paperwork. Since I

couldn't stand the idea of spending an hour a day surrounded by native Spanish-speaking students who only showed up for an easy A, rubbing their fluency in my face. Turns out I'm a natural at French. I was one of the top students, and my pronunciation was pretty good, all things considered. And I'd think to myself, I wish I was French.

Sometimes us, "No Sabos," say we don't care about being Mexican. Like my mother who insists on referring to herself as Hispanic. "I don't know anyone in Mexico," she says—she doesn't know anyone in Spain either. But claiming Spanish origins denotes a legacy from a much more sophisticated culture in her eyes. Since Europeans are the center of philosophy, art and culture, at least that's what is taught in school. To be Hispanic is to be off-white, a concession for unhindered admittance into American society; whereas to be Mexican is to never be white enough.

Or was it the legacy of England she was thinking of the time she made the claim that our ancestors came to America to escape religious persecution. I, in indignation asserted, "We did not come on the Mayflower! We came from serfs and slaves!" Truth is, we don't really know where we come from. We don't have a Coming to America story of docking on Ellis Island or crashing into Plymouth Rock. We've just kind of always been here. But if we've always been here then that means we're just American. So, then the stories that they tell us in school about the origin of this country are our origins too, right?

There's no lore surrounding our existence. We just know that we come from people too poor and too unimportant to be remembered. We do know that white people have nice things. And if we speak and act like them, then maybe we will be able to have nice things too. That's what my grandparents thought when they moved my mom and her siblings out of the barrio into a white neighborhood on the east side of Dallas. My grandparents thinking they're moving up to

a better life. While the neighbors respond in dismay, “Well, there goes the neighborhood!” Right as white flight compels them to move to the suburbs.

During my childhood, the neighborhood was filled with panaderías and used-car lots that say “se habla español” and “no credit necessary.” Sometimes, on the way to my great-grandmother’s house, we’d drive past my mother’s childhood home, of which I vaguely remember visiting. Years before my grandparents sold it in their divorce. Before my mother and grandmother decided it was best to pool their resources (none), and the three of us settled into a townhome near Downtown Dallas. Mostly, I remember how in the middle of the front yard stood a single, towering sunflower. My mom told me that she and her siblings had once scattered seeds. And how, despite the lack of nurturing, the sunflower had blossomed under the harsh Texas heat. After the house was sold, the new owners did away with the sunflower. Whenever we drive by it now, I think how I wish they could have kept it. Maybe as a testament that we were once here. Or just that if something like that wants to thrive despite everything else working against it, you just let it live.