

White Lies
By Erin Murphy

Arpi, a Lebanese girl who pronounced ask as ax no matter how many times the teacher corrected her, must have been delighted by the arrival of Connie, the new girl in our fifth grade class. Connie was albino, exceptionally white even by the ultra-Caucasian standards of our southern suburb. Only her eyelids had color: mouse-nose pink, framed by moth-white lashes and brows.

We had been taught that there was no comparative or superlative for *different*. Things were either different or the same, the teacher said. Likewise for perfect—something was either perfect or not. But surely Arpi thought of Connie as *more different* than herself. Arpi may have had a name that sounded all too close to Alpo, a brand of dog food, but at least she had a family whose skin and hair and eyes looked like hers. Connie, by comparison, was alone in her difference. She was, perhaps, *most different. Differentest.*

This was confirmed by the ridicule, which was immediate and unrelenting: *Casper, Chalk Face, Q-Tip*. Connie, whose shoulders hunched in a permanent parenthesis, pretended not to hear the names or the taunting questions: “What’d ya do, take a bath in bleach? Who’s your boyfriend—Frosty the Snowman?” She sat in the front of the classroom, and if she felt the boys plucking white hairs from her scalp, she didn’t react. The teacher, who was serving the last nine months of a thirty-year sentence in the public school system, spent the bulk of each day perusing magazines and L.L. Bean catalogs in the back of the room. As far as I know, she never intervened.

All of this changed in mid-October when Connie’s father got a job at a candy factory, news Connie announced tentatively one rainy day during indoor recess,

“Can he get us candy?”

“Yes.”

“Any kind? As much as we want? For free?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

And so the daily ritual began. Kids placed orders for Reese’s Cups, Baby Ruth bars, Hubba-Bubba bubble gum. Connie kept a log of the requests in a pocket-sized notebook. The next day, she would tote a box full of candy into the classroom and distribute the promised sweets to eager hands. Overnight, Connie became the center of attention. Girls—even Marcia Miller, the first in our class to wear mascara—would beg to sit by Connie at lunch so they could update their orders.

And what about me? What was my role? Did I request my favorites—Three Musketeers and coconut-centered Mounds bars? Or did I, as I have told myself and others in the years since, refuse to contribute to such cruelty? Or, in a more likely scenario, did I dump out my loot triumphantly at home one afternoon, only to be scolded by my mother? I don’t remember, my memory obscured, I’m sure, by the wishful image of myself as a precocious champion of social justice. And I don’t remember if I actually witnessed—or just imagined—Connie and her mother at the 7-Eleven one day after school. They were in the candy aisle. Her mother was filling a cardboard box. And Connie, bathed in unflinching fluorescence, was curved over her notebook making small, careful check marks.