

OTHERNESS

I discovered my otherness on the blackboard in sixth grade math. Our diminutive teacher, Mr. Neats, was presenting a lesson on percentages. Or ratios. Or maybe statistics. (Math was not my strongest subject.) Mr. Neats was the Energizer bunny in an argyle sweater, and he knew how to keep our puberty-soaked minds engaged. If he wasn't hoisting his barely 5' 2" frame atop his desk to serenade us about exponents, he'd sketch cartoons on the nearly wall-to-wall chalkboard to drive home his point on negative integers. To illustrate the latest topic, he darted beneath the fluorescent lights of our northern New Jersey classroom asking each student which countries their ancestors came from. He pushed up his sleeves and chalked the responses on the board with a zest reserved for those who delight in igniting young minds. I don't have many memories of middle school, but the image of Mr. Neats, with his dependable smile, chalk-dust-covered hands, and irrepressible optimism is one of the most vivid.

We squiggled like worms in our desk chairs as Mr. Neats scribbled Germany, Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands on the blackboard. I tap-tap-tapped a pencil waiting for him to call on me. Tapping pencils quelled my nerves and I kept a cache in my plastic pencil case for this very purpose. I took careful note of how many checkmarks Mr. Neats placed under each location. Ireland and Germany had the most, followed by Italy, which was one of my ancestral homelands. The Netherlands had several. No one had mentioned the ancestral lands I'd soon announce: Puerto Rico and Algeria. This fact had my thumbnails picking away at my pencil erasers. Only now can I see which cogs rotated in my twelve-year-old head. I was worried that I wouldn't fit in. Most kids in our predominantly white Bergen County town didn't have a Spanish-speaking nana who fried pungent bacalao and prayed to santos guarding tiny altars; they didn't have an Algerian papa whose throaty English was indecipherable to anyone that didn't live in our house. I wanted to have something in common with my classmates and to have it marked in Mr. Neats' chicken scratch for all to see. I also wanted to be different—the kid who had something no one else had.

Please, no one say Puerto Rico or Algeria, please, no one say Algeria, don't say it, don't say Puerto Rico, I thought, while row by row

Mr. Neats called on each student.

"Okay, Michelle!" He announced, finally. "Tell us where your ancestors are from."

I started with the country he'd already written down. "Italy."

Mr. Neats scurried down the length of the board and placed a checkmark under Italy and turned to me. "Okay, and anything else?"

"Puerto Rico."

A rumbling of murmurs erupted across the room. Mr. Neats ran to the other side of the board where he had some blank space and spelled out Puerto Rico. He placed a checkmark beneath it and spun toward me, expectant, as if sensing I had more to say. My throat tightened amid the murmuring. Somehow, I found my voice.

"And Algeria."

This is where things get both magnified and fuzzy. The class-wide gasp gutted the air. Possibly every single student turned to catch my eye and regard me the way they might a rare museum relic. I was shoved under a surgical light. But it's only fair to add that I was prone to anxiety—there's a strong possibility only half the class turned to look, and it simply felt like everyone had. Voices burst with, "Mr. Neats, where even is Algeria?" as he scurried like a mad professor to a blank area of the board to add Algeria, a country on a continent no classmates' ancestors called home. I couldn't tell you if Mr. Neats told them where it was or if he unfurled the squeaky pull-down map and showed them. I just know that I demolished three pencil erasers.

My two wishes had been granted. One, everyone saw, with a check mark representing me under Italy, that I had something in common with a few of them. And two, I was the only one who said Puerto Rico and Algeria. And I witnessed everyone see my wishes on the blackboard. I saw them doodle in their spiral-bound notebooks and wiggle impatiently at the mention of familiar-sounding ancestral lands. I heard them murmur and gasp, saw them spin and stare at the mention of mine. Their reactions spelled "other" without saying much at all.

I gather these were simply the reactions of inquisitive sixth graders who'd been presented with places they'd never encountered, embodied in the quiet olive-skinned girl in the next to last row. Still, it's something I'd never unsee.