

Projection

Our display-wall flickers awake, and in a minute dad's face will be stretched across the length of our centreroom. "Aah-dheeee," I elongate the vowels so my brother will hear me from down the hall. As I quickly finish setting the cooker to run, I imagine dad sitting down somewhere else in the world, his face slowly relaxing from Businessman-Bold to Familyman-Friendly in happy anticipation of our weekly call. This thought makes me smile, and I walk over to our centreroom seating, as dad's face comes into focus. "Hey".

Dad and I chat casually. I update him on the recent Enforcement coursework in school, and he tells me stories of his most eccentric new clients, leaving out confidential content. Mostly, he jokes relentlessly, as, I think to myself, only dads really do. At a break in the conversation, I notice the stark contrast of dad—dark turtleneck, olive skin—against the blanched white walls of his hotel room; I try to remember how long he's been gone. I miss him this time. I'll be graduating from Uppers next week, transitioning into adulthood. Ironically, I am childishly excited that dad is coming home, and will see me in the Final-Year March. "Niv—" dad starts to say, but Adi runs in, footsteps loud, and I turn.

"Adi!" I demand, my eyes narrowing when I see him, and he slides to a halt on the wooden floors. He looks cartoonishly confused, unclear as to what he has done wrong. Adi's hair is still wet from his shower, and water is drip-drip-dripping down his right cheek. Adi is tan like dad, but his round cheeks are all mom's. She used to call Adi her little Hanuman, but I don't know if he remembers that. Adi is racking his brain now, trying to read my expression, trying to

remember what he's forgotten. After a few seconds, he touches his fingers to his collarbones, realizing he has ditched his Projection-Band to shower and carelessly forgotten to restrap it around his neck. Adi zips back to the showerroom, but mumbles that dad isn't wearing his either. Dad is doing this silent almost-laugh—but I'm starting to get annoyed.

“He learns this from you! He sees you not wearing yours when you call, and he learns to think that is acceptable! DAD IS RESTRAPPING HIS NOW,” I shout loudly, so Adi can hear. But Adi isn't done—doesn't understand why I'm upset. Our Projection-Bands are legally programmed to override race, to only cast grey-scale onto our faces and to project constructed facial features that are WITHIN-AVERAGE over any natural facial features that are classified as RACIALLY-NOCUOUS. But when Adi lumbers in, joking, pantomiming some monster-creature, he has reprogrammed his Projection-Band to cast his face a sickly green, completing his monster visage. Adi is proud of his engineering feat, impressive for a Lower. Dad is hooting. I am furious. “DAD,” I yell, and he chuckles before paying me attention. “Niv, I'm in my hotel room, and he's at home. He's a Lower, still growing up. Nothing will happen”. Suddenly, I am screaming: *“When Adi forgets to wear his Band into the city—WHEN YOU'RE NOT HERE—when he gets on the L-Way without it—or BREAKS it—is surrounded by one hundred ENFORMENT AGENTS—one thousand civilians—when they announce he has been REASSIGNED—IT WILL BE **your** FAULT”*.

I stop—my breathing is loud; Adi and dad have gone silent; and I'm trying to make my breathing less loud—and I know I've crossed a line, overreacted,

overreached. Dad's lips are thin and pursed as he slips his Band on silently, and his skin appears instantly grey-scaled, his thick eyebrows thinned, protruding forehead shrunk down, down, *within-average*; and I am so utterly sorry, because he is right: Enforcement never polices inside homes and only rarely polices inside schools. I say I am on the brink of adulthood, but in this moment I am acutely aware of my capacity to be childish, temperamental, and cutting. Dad is looking down, not meeting my eyes. "Goodnight," he says quietly, "Love you both". He sounds tired. We switch off.

Tonight, when I get to my room, I sit down on the carpet in front of my mirror, and I lean in close. Projection-Bands are not personalized. They simply scan their wearer to determine what pixels to project. In fact, Projection-Bands are unnervingly generic for a wide-spread techno-political-device: each Band has a hard, black polymer encasing, and the securing strap along the back edge is embossed END-RACE->END-RACISM in boxy, capital letters — a tribute to the original movement. Adi and I were very young when mandated Projection-Bands and recommended Skin-Treatments became the State's championed method to end race in order to solve racial conflict. Staring at my reflection, I unstrap and restrap my Band repeatedly, methodically. I've always seen how my Projection shrinks down my large, south-Asian eyes—but tonight I flip back and forth between myself and my Projection, scrutinizing the subtler differences—millimeter by millimeter, as if pixel by pixel. I don't know what I really think about the Projection Laws, but the Enforcement coursework they have begun assigning to the Uppers assures me there are severe penalties for non-compliance. There

are whispers now that Projection-Bands and Skin-Treatments are merely the State's precursor to legally mandated RACIAL -AVERAGING surgeries. *End race, end racism, they believe . . .*

Adi walks in. He sits down cross-legged beside me, interrupting my thoughts. Today's outburst was inappropriate, uncharacteristically sharp even relative to my often hot temper. Adi has not forgiven me yet; but I am his sister, and Adi's curiosity is more potent than his anger. He looks at me expecting explanation, but I only return silence. Then Adi blinks, looks down, and tries another approach: "What am I, Little One?" he asks cautiously. My eyes widen, revealing my surprise. It's a game our mother used to play with us when we were very young. She would gently trace our eyes and noses and lips with her fingertips, attributing our features to animals, or relatives, or Hindu gods, back when racially-embedded topics were tolerated, when the END-RACE->END-RACISM movement was just being born. *Adi's memories may only come in bits and pieces, I think, but they stretch further back than I realize.* Given my thoughts tonight, the memory Adi has referenced is oddly prescient. I wonder if he discerns this.

As a sort of tribute to the memory, I carefully un-strap both of our Bands, and I squeeze Adi's hand twice in succession. He knows I still feel strongly about what I've said today, but this is a peace offering and I am sorry. I cross my legs and face Adi directly. "You are Hanuman's cheeks," I say gently, and he grins a bit, so I guess he remembers that, too. "What am I, Little One?" I ask. Adi thinks for a moment, before replying. "You are your great big eyes, all the better to see

you with!” he says. We play a few more rounds, each trying to say the thing that is funnier or more obscure: Adi is Hanuman’s cheeks, Feynman’s smarts, dad’s fluffy eyebrows; I am my great big eyes, mom’s dark walnutty skin, Shiva’s catastrophic anger. When our eyelids feel heavy, we both pull ourselves onto my bed, and curl up on top of the covers. *In the morning*, I make a mental note, *I will apologize to dad*. Sleep and a sunrise, and things will be okay. Adi is already asleep and snoring.

By Tuesday, dad is home, and by Friday my outburst is forgotten, because this particular day, Friday the 9th of June, is National Day, the day of the Graduation Marches. The National Day ceremony is extensive; State-sanctioned. State officials will give speeches during sections of the march, and Enforcement Agents will stand guard along the perimeter. Today, we are not students, but symbols—representing a future we don’t fully understand.

Households with Lowers face a particular kind of chaos the morning of National Day, as the young students struggle to suppress nervous energy brought about by their own sudden importance. This morning, parents and siblings check and re-check that clothing standards and Projection Laws are obeyed precisely. In Adi’s room, we play out the chaotic ritual, Adi brimming with anxiety and excitement as I desperately try to make him presentable. When we are finished, I force Adi to stand still under the light. For Lowers, graduation attire is standardized: an ironed grey Cocoon coat over white slacks, Oxford shirt, silver tie—a grey-scale ensemble meant to most elegantly accompany each student’s grey-scale Projection. Adi has been successfully standardized. Face to

foot, he has been grey-scaled down—“Perfect,” I say, and smile at him. Another thought, darker, occurs to me—but I quickly snuff it out. Adi heads to the kitchen, where dad has promised to have eggs and idli ready for consuming. Today will be perfect.

With a sharp exhale, I pull open the door to my closet. As a Final-Year Upper, I have the privilege of selecting my own graduation attire, and I have purchased a long-sleeved, full-length dress in garnet-red. The selection is primarily functional—covering my dark skin as much as possible is societally expected until I have my Skin-Treatments conducted; but the dress looks redder than I remember, more attention grabbing. Weeks ago, I selected a pant-suit in mute gray, but Adi so earnestly insisted red suited me—“my hot temper and all”—that I finally let him make my selection. I regret that now. I will certainly not be the only Final-Year in color, but we will be the minority, and the minority does not seem a secure place to be. Pushing my shoulders back, I demand confidence from my body; I restrap my Projection-Band; and I slip into red.

Breakfast is quick, and, taking the L-Way, zipping above the city, to Lier Hall is even quicker. I see hundreds of people on the Central Paths below, most dressed for National Day celebrations. Students, grey blobs among them, look particularly tiny, surrounded by relatives, dwarfed by the blocky concrete skyscrapers of the city. I am glad that dad is meeting us at the Hall and that we are not walking the Central Paths today.

At the five-minute mark on the L-Way, I am listening to the National Broadcast, and a reporter is excitedly mentioning rumors of surgeries again,

when, out of my peripheral vision, I see Adi teaching a group of Lowers to hang from the emergency straps on the car's ceiling—*unbelievable*. Fortunately, by the time I grab my things and walk over to Adi, the L-Way has hit the six-minute mark, meaning we have arrived at Lier Hall, and I can pull him onto the platform by his arm. *And then, suddenly, I start laughing*. I am laughing and laughing—a deep, honest laugh that probably threatens wrinkling my dress—because Adi's hyper-energetic antics are such a goddamn relief from the anxiety hanging over this ceremony. "You!" I shake him faux-angrily. On a whim, I tell him we are going to do cartwheels in the park tomorrow, and he smiles one of his big, wholesome Adi-smiles and agrees. More relaxed, I mess up Adi's hair on purpose—and then smooth it down again as we enter the Hall.

Adi and I split when we enter, heading to the Lowers' and Uppers' lines, respectively. At first, I feel self-conscious and alone, but then I hear my name, and a group of Uppers girls I've had classes with are all at once around me, inviting me to stand with them while we wait for the younger years to complete their march. I am confused, but happy for company, and I listen to their speculation into the content of this year's State speeches. Only after a few minutes do I realize I have been recruited by the outcasts. The girls who have not yet had Skin-Treatments conducted have banded together, seeking refuge from the darting eyes of Enforcement, and they have invited me into the unspoken collective. I suddenly, urgently want to bow out. Pulling my sleeves over my hands, I slip away unnoticed—my dark skin no longer visible to souls seeking refuge in commonality. As I walk away, though, I feel darker, and I cannot

overcome a nagging guilt, as if I have betrayed some cult I never elected to join. I shift my attention from the tangled guilt at my core to the simple, methodical task of scanning the audience for dad.

When I finally see a man I think might be him, I wave, but this man is not looking my way. He is arguing? A woman in all black and a Bowler hat—is she a District Leader?—she looks increasingly angry with him, and just as I think the pair is turning to face me, the lights dim, and I lose them in the crowd. The Lowers' March is beginning on the other side of the Hall. Thank God—I am overwhelmed and craving the stability of standardization. Techno-acoustic music swells up, and the crowd quiets, as these, our youngest students, pace out a syncopated rhythm. From three hundred meters away, it is impossible to tell one Lower from another—each one a grey blur, each one standardized; but Adi has told me ahead of time that he is in the back left quadrant of the group.

A State official is speaking—saying something about recent progress in the long-term pursuit of RACIAL - AVERAGING—but a flicker has caught my attention. I fix my gaze, don't move, don't blink—and it happens again: a flicker near the back-left of the Lowers' ranks. My heart drops like a bomb—wound-up chaos falling slowly through air. I am paralyzed.— — —Then, as if the bomb has hit deep in my insides, I explode into motion. I am running now—sprinting along the back wall of the Hall, my dress bunched up in my left hand. I need to get there before Enforcement does. I will not let Adi face the consequences of non-compliance, the consequences which, when referenced in class, have made me feel sick to my stomach. My vision goes blurry. With my right hand, I prepare to

unstrap my own Projection-Band, prepare to hand it to Adi, just as his flickers out, to myself face Enforcement long before I allow him to face that fate. I am almost there. I am there. I am here . . . But the flicker is gone? Adi is fine. I gulp air. His Projection-Band remains around his neck, and my Band remains around mine. I breathe. Enforcement has not even noticed him. My vision begins to clear.

But they have noticed me.

Suddenly, I realize, *I* have become the threat—dark legs and hands under a bold red dress, my urgency not understood—and that is enough; it does not matter that my Projection-Band is still firmly in place. Today, I am not a student, I am a symbol; and without breaking laws, I have become a symbol of the threat. Enforcement eyes dart to me, as I stand, panting along the edge of the Hall. Agents begin to close in. Then, three events occur in succession: one, a woman in all black and a Bowler hat whispers something to the State official who has been speaking about proto-political surgeries; two, both women look back at me; three, the speaker announces, “Please welcome Nivedita—who will be our first subject of RACIAL -AVERAGING”.

The crowd cheers. Enforcement backs off. The room goes dark.