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### What's the Difference

Years ago, I learned that apparently, I wasn't like others. I grew up in the suburbs as a kid, surrounded by great friends. The majority of my friends were Caucasian, and they were very accepting of who I am. I felt as if I was one of them. Even though I thought I fit in with them, not everyone had the same opinion. My family's story is the American story, but people assume differently. People assume I am separate from them, based only on the way I look, but my ancestors came to America a long time ago too, and also worked very hard so my family could have great lives in the United States. At one point, my grandma had two jobs trying to support the family. It was a tough choice to make, but they did it so I could have the life I do today. It's not that I have a different background, but I do have a different appearance, and that gives people a different idea. I was young, and unaware of a lot of social issues in the world as a kid. But I was quick to learn that some people aren't as accepting as others.

I was fifteen years young, early sophomore year at Park Hill High School. A couple friends and I were walking around a strip mall back home in Kansas City, called Zona Rosa. This was the hangout spot since no one could drive yet. Everyone would walk to "Zona" right after school, and a quick stop at Sonic for an after school snack, since everything was so close. Laughing and having a good time, we stopped by multiple stores such as Zumiez, Journey's, and Dick's Sporting Goods. Not a care in the

world, young and innocent. My only problems were wondering if my mom would buy me the new Ultra Boost, and if I'd ever get the new girl to like me.

We finally get to Barnes and Noble since that is where the girls want to go. We hear the door's high pitched squeak as I grasp the cold handle and hold it for all my friends to enter. I follow shortly behind entering as the warm air meets my rosey cheeks and nose. Our mouths water as we smell the Starbucks coffee brewing in the back of the building.

"Are you kidding me?" I hear as I take a couple steps past the magazine section in front. I turn to see an elderly man making direct eye contact with me. He is just taller than me. Looking down with anger in his bright blue eyes and hair as white as the snow melting on the carpet under my feet. I've never seen him before.

"Is there a problem, sir?" I ask, confused about the situation.

"You can't even hold the door open for women?" he scoffs.

"I did hold the door open for my friends," I state, still unsure about what he witnessed, trying to retrace my steps.

"I saw those young ladies open that door with my eyes, you did not hold the door for these women," he claims. I remember that there are two doors before entering the actual building. I feel scared, as if I had done something wrong. The back of my neck begins to get hot, as I am thinking of which direction to sprint off in. I feel exposed and, as I see my friends headed up on the escalator, alone.

"I held the first door for my friends, but I was the last person in line, so I couldn't make it to the other door." I stammer, trying to clarify my actions, as the winter breeze

makes its way into the building sending a chill up my spine. The shivers are a startling contrast to the heat in my face.

“You don’t belong here, go back to where you came from,” he says angrily as he walks through the creaking doors under the bright, beaming red “Exit” sign.

I stand there in silence, frozen like the pavement outside, not knowing what to think of the situation I have just been in. As a kid I was never put into a position like this. Everything stops in the bookstore as I process this abrupt change in my understanding of who I am. It was at that moment that people realized I was different. I came to the conclusion I am not viewed the same as everyone because of my Hispanic appearance. I have to try harder to fit in because people will assume that I don’t.

Although this was a bad encounter for a teenager to have at fifteen, it was a learning experience for me. It taught me the first thing people see is brown skin. They don’t see that I am good with toddlers, they don’t see that I excel in school, they don’t see my athletic interests, or even that I have never been outside the country. America is my birthplace, how can I go back to somewhere I have never been? Maybe not the ideal learning experience. Every time I look back on that memory, I just want to prove people wrong: I’m not different from anyone else and I don’t need to go anywhere. I can’t; this is my home too.

I am treated differently because of the color of my skin, but I shouldn’t be. I am no less American than my Caucasian friends, but experiences like mine can make people of color feel like it. And when people don’t feel like they belong in their own country, how are they expected to love it?

I am proud of my brown skin and I am also proud of being American. Both of those things are part of who I am, and I am proud of who I am. So who am I? I'm part of the American story. And there is no reason for people to assume that I'm not.