



FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

The Gifted Classes

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When we would walk down Sixteenth Street in San Francisco to the schoolyard or across Sanchez to the corner store, we'd keep a lookout for cool cars. If one drove by — a red Mustang convertible, a tiny MG, a black Jag with the silver cat ready to pounce off the hood — whoever saw it first would point and say, "That's my car!" We could play this game anywhere, my brothers and their buddies and I, shouting the words loud and fast to drown out anyone else who might be thinking about claiming the same car. You could even play the game alone, whispering the three magic words while walking home from school or sitting in a window seat on the bus, leaning your drowsy head against the sun-warmed glass. Then the car would speed off through the traffic, carrying your dreams out of sight. You'd covet, grasp, and lose, all in a few quick seconds of shiny colored metal whizzing by.

But time, like traffic, moves on. In a moment that lasts maybe a year or two, everything that was clear about the world becomes hazy and then sharpens up again, like the view through a camera lens as you twist the focus in and out. What you once knew without thinking begins to clash with the evidence darting out at you from all around — from TV and movies and comic books and magazines, and even real life, like the way your mother oversmiles as she takes the crumpled green bills out of her fabric wallet and hands them to the department-store clerk to pay for the book, scarf, dress, hat, and kerchief that you need to join the Brownies. This is the moment when you discover that there are people out there who have things that you don't have. You're not sure *why* things are different for these other people, but you're sure *how* they are different: these people have lots of things — new things, big things — and they are always getting more things, and even the things they throw out are things you wouldn't mind having. Now that you know this, it is hard to make a game out of claiming cool cars as your own. And no one you know — not even your father, who finds you melancholy in front of Saturday-morning cartoons — can comfort you, because they have long known and therefore cannot understand the awfulness of these truths: that the world goes on around you, and parts of this life are untouchable.

I have nothing to say about the politics of poverty, what causes it and what it causes and how to make it go away. I can only tell you what poverty does to a person. It gets inside you, nestles into your bones, and gives you a chill that you cannot shake. Poverty becomes you — it shapes what you see and taste and dream — till there is no telling where you stop and poverty begins. To be poor is to live in denial — not the denial of professional counselors and self-help books, which is

an avoidance of some truth too painful to admit, but denial in its most literal sense: you must say no to yourself constantly. Being poor means stripping down to the essentials, and there's not much a person really needs to survive — bread, cheese, blankets, a little black-and-white TV, some toothpaste, soap, pencils, a library card. In and of itself, it isn't bad not to have things, and if all of us lived this way, there would hardly be anything wrong with it at all. To be poor is one thing; to *know* that you are poor is another thing altogether. That is when poverty becomes poison.



In my junior high school, an L-shaped, four-story stucco building with a yard covered in blacktop and painted with white and yellow lines, I got transferred into what was then called the "gifted classes." It was there that I met people, not just characters on TV or in the movies, but real people who were gifted in every sense of the word — gifted with homes and meals and stereos and cars and vacations, and gifted also with a faith in the rightness of the world and their place in it, a faith that was, and still is, foreign to me. Until my second semester of seventh grade, my world was full of kids like me: Kids whose parents were struggling to keep them fed, clothed, in school, and out of trouble. Kids who arrived accidentally or too soon, who spent a lot of time on their own, scheming and scamming to get by, just like their parents. Kids who zipped up their blue-hooded sweat shirts on a damp Saturday morning and stuffed their dirty clothes into a pillowcase and lugged it down the street to the laundromat. Kids who made their own lunches and were sent to Safeway with booklets of orange-and-white food stamps to buy milk or tuna fish or a quarter pound of bologna from the meat counter, and who kept their fingers crossed that the cashier would have a heart and give them real change back instead of the coupons for fifty-eight or thirty-five or twenty-two cents.

Then suddenly I was plopped into the middle of these gifted classes filled with the middle classes — kids, mostly white, many Jewish, who wore braces and were driven to and from school by their parents and who brought homemade lunches in crisp white paper bags, not oversized and wrinkled brown bags left over from carrying home a half gallon of milk and a loaf of bread, but bags bought in a package expressly for the purpose of packing school lunches. Every morning they picked up these bags, plump with promise, from clean tile counters. Then at lunch, they brought them outside to the benches in the yard, rather than sit inside the cafeteria, where the rest of us

were eating hot lunch for free or a reduced price, our parents having filled out the requisite forms, putting the right numbers into the right blanks. The gifted kids ate outside, with the clean smell of fog and eucalyptus, and got first dibs on the handball court, and left portions of their lunches — half a sandwich, a baggie of raisins — for the seagulls who flew up from Ocean Beach and hovered above the schoolyard, waiting until the bell rang and we ran inside for class.

The first lesson of the Gifted Program was that money made you smart: poor kids went to the regular or the dumb classes; rich kids went to gifted. There also appeared to be some connection between race and smarts; I was white, so I could pass, could slip by and seem to fit in with the gifted, even if I didn't. The San Francisco Unified School District used to send its notices home in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog, so the color line was far from black and white, but it was there nonetheless. I had a social-studies teacher — also coach of the public-speaking club I had joined — who once told me how she wouldn't let a black girl in her class go to the "bathroom" until she could say it properly. She told me this as a joke between two people of the same color and, she assumed, class. But all I could feel was the pressure of a full bladder and the fear of peeing my pants in front of thirty kids as a teacher taunted me for reasons I didn't understand.

What happens to a poor white girl who gets transplanted into the gifted classes? A girl whose way of thinking is based equally on logic and emotion, whose affinity for schoolwork, like her younger brother's affinity for sports, could be traced in part to the void left by a recent divorce, which split up not only the parents but also the three children? At first I wonder if a mistake has been made. My confidence, the sassy way I hold my own against my brothers and the boys in the neighborhood, leaks out of me like water from the bottom of a potted plant. In class, I don't raise my hand or join the discussion; I'm not even sure what the others are talking about. Is it possible they are speaking a different language? Like an exile from another country, I don't know where to sit at lunchtime, don't know what to do when my old friends — the ones I used to cut school with and go smoke in the bushes or steal lip gloss from Woolworth's — call me "traitor" as we pass each other in the hallway.

Eventually, my curiosity, my creativity, and my yearning for praise take over. One day during a spelling bee, I am one of only two students left standing, and it dawns on me that I am as smart as these gifted kids. One of those kids, an especially kind Jewish girl with honey blond hair and perfect manners, lives on the way to my house, and we start to walk home together. Pretty soon she invites me over. We walk into her kitchen and drop our backpacks on the counter next to the stacks of towels that have been washed, dried, and folded by the cleaning lady, and my friend opens a huge refrigerator filled to bursting. Like in a filmstrip, her voice narrates the contents of the fridge: "We could have salami and crackers, grilled cheese with pickles, turkey and mustard. . . ." Then she opens the freezer — it runs the whole length of the fridge — and continues the narration, "Orangesicles, mini pizzas, frozen Milky Way

bars . . ." as frosty vapor pours into the kitchen like the five o'clock fog coming off the bay.

After our snack, we go up the carpeted stairs to her bedroom. Though she has her own desk and chair, she prefers to do homework on the thick fluff of her peach-colored carpet, and therefore so do I. The bedroom has two doors, the one we came in, and one that leads to a bathroom with clean white tiles and a fuzzy blue rug on the floor and a matching fuzzy blue cover on the toilet seat. (A cover for a toilet seat!) On the other side of this bathroom is another door, leading to her brother's room. Her parents have their own bathroom in their bedroom. And there is yet another bathroom downstairs, near the kitchen.

After we've done our homework, we put our books and binders away and listen to Elton John sing "Goodbye, Yellowbrick Road" on her very own stereo. Then we go down to the game room in the basement, where we play ping-pong and, one time, I eat dog food on a dare. As the hour turns from 4:30 to 5:30 and the sky goes from hazy blue to dark purple, the smells of cooking start to wind their way downstairs from the kitchen. Some evenings, my friend conferences discreetly with her mother (Who initiates these talks, I wonder; does the daughter ask the mother, or does the mother ask the daughter?), and I am invited to dinner, a meal in which half a pink grapefruit or an artichoke waits in its own little bowl at each setting, and cloth napkins lie in wooden holders brought back from safari in Africa, and the father and mother and sister and brother take their seats and slip their napkins out of their holders and put them on their laps, then slowly, accompanied by the foreign language of polite conversation, work their way through the first course, the main course, and dessert.

"Don't you need to call home," the mother asks, her teeth as big and white as the pearls in her ears, "to let your parents know where you are?"

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