

## The Code

*Pathak's Jewelry Shop has been selling my grandmother diamonds for the past four decades. But today she is not pleased. I sit with her, as she sifts through the glittering earrings laid out on the countertop, sighing occasionally because I am thirteen years old and bored. In a puddle of mud outside that the rickshaws veer around, there are two wild piglets fighting over a banana peel. "Not good enough," my grandmother states, throwing the last diamond back on the counter. The store clerk scurries into the back. I look outside. The piglets have been joined by a street child, all scavenging for the same scraps in the dirt.*

When I was fifteen, I was sent to boarding school. It was a small school, fervently Catholic, and filled with girls who had far too much money and very little parental guidance. The hallways buzzed with the strangest gossip, of girls crashing yachts in Ibiza, snorting coke with B-list celebrities in London and having weekend rendezvous in Moscow—and surrounded by this astonishingly, audaciously, unapologetically entitled environment, I became accustomed to the liberating power of true privilege.

I never quite had the reckless abandon with which my peers burnt away their cash. I also never harbored a deep-seated desire to rebel against the parents who had shipped me away, so perhaps the lack of motive prevented the vulgarly expensive habits from forming. It did not prevent me, however, from desperately seeking to be a central part of our small community. We were very close knit, perhaps unhealthily so, but the strength of the bonds we provided for each other made up for any lack of parental warmth. But despite my best efforts, my particular brand of loneliness

was not so easily dispelled. For regardless of the privilege of class that we all enjoyed and endured together, there was another we did not: they were white, and that was one luxury I was not blessed with at birth.

**Kenji. My name is Kenji. Good to meet you.**

**As if the act of knowing my name confirmed the appropriateness of finally grasping my hand in a clammy handshake, Kristen took it—and then blew it.**

**Candy? Yeah, nice to meet you too.**

*Wow, that's a new one! Here we go.*

**No. Actually, it's Kenji. My name is Kenji.**

**Oh I'm sorry. Kenji...**

*That wasn't so bad.*

**...like Benji, right? Benji the dog!**

*(207-208, Why You Don't Have to Choose a White Boy Name to Be a Man in This World, Kenji Tokawa)*

Little things, microscopic, almost, made me very permanently aware that I would always be 'other', despite the girls' insistence that I could not be so. For all their worldliness and travel, our village (the most boring enclave of ethnic homogeneity in the western hemisphere) had its ethos rooted in their brains, regressing their understanding of multiculturalism to an occasional viewing of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Race having such little presence in their lives meant that it was relegated to a quirk, like a large birthmark or the ability to wiggle your ears; its effects, therefore, minimized almost into oblivion. My daily, small irritations, like the make-up counter at the village drug store not stocking a single shade of brown foundation, were not easy for them to sympathize with. *Just order some online*, they said, and the fact that I had to did not strike them as unusual. They did not understand my urge—and this was seldom an urge and more a recurring, yearning ache—to grab sandpaper and scrape away the pigment on my face, until my cheeks were as pink as my roommate's and the make-up counter would have a shade of white that matched me.

*We are driving now, having hastily shoved some money at the street child whilst our driver opened the car door. The relentless Indian sun glints off the windshield. My grandmother wipes my face with her handkerchief gently.*

*“When you are sweaty you look darker, beti,” she says, a kind smile crinkling her eyes. I nod, and mentally prepare myself for the lemon juice she will rub on my skin later this evening.*

News of my roommate, Eliza, dating a black boy named Aki from the next village spread through the school. The amazed whispers of how they met and what he was like were never malicious, but ever present. An ocean away, Obama might have been President—but as much as we cheered him and grumbled that this was his last term, our lily-white village was never conceived as a place where a black boy and a white girl would be together. The relationship’s lack of precedence meant no one explicitly had a problem with it, but also, no one quite knew how to react. The approval of a white boy was a standard, well known barometer to measure a girl’s attractiveness against. A black boy, however, was a different story. The general confusion surrounding the relationship led to varied justifications of it, and most often, it seemed to be viewed as rebellion—against the usual villains of our school, her parents, the village and our futures. For whatever reason, whenever Aki came to visit, a giggling excitement reminiscent of a celebrity encounter fell over our boarding house. If this ever bothered Eliza, she never mentioned it. In the face of the continually running rumor mill, Eliza’s fondness for Aki seemed to remain a constant, untainted by the accusations of ulterior motives that their relationship was so frequently justified by.

**“We talked about how this culture of white supremacy presents the white male body as what is normal for masculinity. Along with the body comes the acceptable set of names. Along with a presumed whiteness comes respect. Along with this respect comes confidence and safety to move about this world...”**

***(210, *Why You Don't Have to Choose a White Boy Name to Be a Man in This World*, Kenji Tokawa).***

Aki was another, fully fledged human being of color. His race acted on him in ways that I would never endure, and vice versa—but it was the fact that there *was* another person who was affected by race, someone to find solidarity with, that made me feel ecstatic, inexpressible relief. We shared the understanding that we were fundamentally mascots of our cultures, bound to this onerous duty of breaking stereotypes and being the best versions of our races that we could manage. This was the whitewashed multiculturalism that our peers could stomach, and I finally, *finally* had someone I could talk to about the small injustices of that precedent that made every day a little more exasperating than it needed to be. In lunch time chats and living room debates, Aki brought up real, concerning issues, like the impending Brexit referendum and the total joke of Donald Trump ever becoming a presidential candidate. The things he said seemed to hold weight—not just because he was bright, but also because he was black. When he expressed support for groups like Black Lives Matter, the movement seemed more relevant than ever before; perhaps because, for us, he was an embodiment of the men the movement was advocating for.

Maybe it was his novelty (many of the girls never saw a black man in the flesh unless they were on one of their adventures abroad) as well as, I'm sure, his charm—he was a very easy boy to like—that somehow inspired an enlightenment in the other girls of race and its immeasurable consequences. This was a phenomenon I had never managed to elicit during my time in their presence. Perhaps my whitewashed nature prevented them from seeing me as a true cultural

example, although sometimes I wondered if I intentionally whitewashed myself to prevent them from seeing me as such. Far from annoyance that Aki, and not I, had caused their sudden awareness, I felt a warm pride. Here were my girls, whose privileged apathy was slowly eroding—and here I was, an unintentional benefactor of that fact. There was no question that whatever joy Aki was bringing Eliza— and it did always seem to slip my mind that he was there for her—his presence had made my own feel more important.

*We are having a special dinner this evening. I get ready two hours early, wincing as the maid pricks my waist with a safety pin. She is trying to fasten together the thick silk of my sari. Her eyes are red and wet and she is not paying attention. I ask her if she is all right. She pats my cheek a little clumsily, and bustles out of the room to go and get my jewelry.*

On one afternoon, a few months after Aki had entered our lives, Eliza and I were preparing to go out and shop. As she was rifling through her wardrobe for a shirt to wear, I began to absentmindedly talk about something trivial, glancing up to see what she had decided on. I stopped. She had pulled her shirt off, and interrupting the expanse of pale skin was a ferocious, blooming bruise that enveloped the left side of her ribcage. It was quite extraordinary—and clearly old—speckled with green and yellow but still purpling in the middle, like an ugly firework exploding out of her chest. I could not understand how I had not seen it before. She caught my eye as she noticed me staring, and even then I would have still probably brushed it off as the product of a bad fall—but there was something about the indecipherable expression on her face, a mixture of resignation and fear, that made me uneasy.

“How’d that happen?” I asked casually, hoping she’d say something trivial. She did not respond immediately. There was a sudden tenseness in the air, as though a thick veil had fallen over the room, obscuring the weak February sunlight that was dappling in through the window and muting the laughter of the girls walking outside.

“Me and Aki got in a fight. Promise you won’t tell.”

*I see my grandmother’s eyes shine with joy and love as she watches me walk down the marble stairs. My sari is suffocating and heavy, but I smile back at her. As she begins to introduce me to guests, I pull her aside and ask what is wrong with the maid. She gives me a searching look and says, “Don’t worry about her now. She is just fine.”*

*I begin to talk back.*

*“It is not our business to know. It is not proper to concern ourselves in the matters of others,” she says firmly, as she always does when I get too curious. A hint of sternness has entered her voice. I know better than to argue.*

I’m still not sure whether it was the bluntness with which she said it or the inconceivable nature of what she had said, but I began to giggle, uncontrollably, whilst apologizing for not noticing the bruise before. She muttered something back about it not being a big deal and that we hadn’t really seen each other over the past month and that it was fine, but then I started apologizing for giggling because for some reason I just could not stop, and now I was crying *and* giggling, strangely breathless despite my heaving gasps, barely registering the oddly pitying tone

in Eliza's voice as she drew me into a hug that muffled my sobs against her shoulder. Even in my state of utter incomprehension, I thought how ridiculous it was that I was the one being comforted in this situation.

I did not tell anyone. The cuts and bruises that appeared on Eliza in the following months were constant reminders that this was not the right thing to do, and the rest of the girls' blindness to them in the glow of Aki's presence served as an insistent remonstrance of my inaction. I had the power here to right this wrong...but as to whether I had the right, was a different matter. Eliza, despite her nightly ritual of crying herself to sleep, besieged me with pleas every morning not to tell anyone. She did not want to break up with him, and after all, this was, fundamentally, an issue between her and Aki. Wasn't I merely an accidental third party, unintentionally privy to one of the most private of matters? But I could not shrug the feeling that my supposed respect of her agency was merely an easy excuse to absolve myself of responsibility, making me just another silent bystander not willing to do the brave thing. I knew what the moral thing to do was, I knew that I was *supposed* to tell—but I had made a promise that I would not, and I could not break my promise to Eliza. She and I, along with the other girls, had a code: and that code meant promises had purchase.

**In reality, not a single one of us is so magically normative as to claim the right to separate out the freaks from everyone else. We are all freaks to someone. Maybe even—if we're honest—to ourselves.**

*(29, We're All Someone's Freak, Gwendolyn Ann Smith)*

It was a strange code we all had, which could, I think, only have arisen from the ludicrous situation we were all thrown in together. In the small microcosm that is boarding school, it is very easy to let adolescent self-pity run rampant over reason. It seemed we were the only ones who had our best interests at heart, who didn't want us to become subserviently proper, maturing

quietly into perfect molds of what upper society daughters should be. It was us against them, them being the world and everyone in it, and every notion of what we ‘should’ be was there to be shattered. This powerlessness and loneliness, and more than that, our unrelenting rebellion against those feelings, led to desperate clamors for attention so noisy and insistent I’m not sure even we could make sense of them. Nevertheless, we never judged each other. We never snitched on each other. We never broke our promises, and we always, always kept secrets. The repercussions of breaking trust in this group were terrible to behold. We were only worth the secrets we could bear, and the disloyal were shunned to the point of being non-existent. In living quarters as close as ours, that rejection is not easy to survive. No one seemed to question how, in our efforts to band together to revolt against society’s expectations for us, we ironically placed even further sanctions on ourselves—and the trust and expectations that tethered us together very often felt like shackles. We were, of course, each other’s best friends; but I could never rid myself of the lingering doubt that this was only because we forced ourselves to be.

Boys, however, were a different matter. They weren’t bound to us by code or blood, but by want. Many of us, dropped off here at the age of thirteen with a swift kiss goodbye and not a backwards glance, were not used to that feeling: that wonderful, intoxicating feeling of being wanted. The thought of not chasing that feeling, of letting go of someone who wanted you of their own volition...to us, how could that not seem like we were throwing away a tangible reminder of our worth? Perhaps, for Eliza, this meant fists were better than a cold shoulder—and even if he was bruising her half the time, then at least it was better than not being touched at all.

*I wake up late the next day. My grandfather has returned from a business trip. He sits in his favorite armchair, and my grandmother has made tea and is serving it to him. She grimaces slightly as she bends over the tea set. Her knees have been hurting her. My grandfather smiles,*



*takes the tea, and goes back to his newspaper. She sits next to him dutifully, waiting until he finishes his drink.*

I hated him for having this power, for resurrecting an age old dynamic between male and female relationships that diminished the woman to a pawn. I resented her for giving him this power, because she, of all people, was never a wallflower who ever let herself be disrespected—and I was ravaged by guilt, because what was I doing, other than letting a fear of loneliness and a tradition of silence have power over me? I spent insomniac nights wandering around the boarding house, thinking about Eliza, at the crux of the issue, who would never forgive me if I betrayed her. Retrospectively, I realize that the onus was on me to make that decision regardless; to tell her that her pride was not worth the destruction of her body, and convince myself that my isolation was a far better price to pay.

**In the end, we find ourselves with one of two choices: do we push others like us away, to best fit in? Or do we seek out our kind, for comfort and for company? For that matter, if we are all someone's "freak", does this mean we are all each other's "normal" too—and worthy of embrace?**

***(29, We're All Someone's Freak, Gwendolyn Ann Smith)***

I still question what grounded my inaction in the months following these events. It could not have been Aki—the sense of betrayal I felt regarding him rendered me apathetic to any repercussions the publicizing of his abusiveness would have on him. He may have been the one person I knew who understood my experience of being a perpetual token, but I was now revolted to identify with him. We were supposed to dispel stereotypes of our cultures, which wasn't fair but it was necessary—I had thought we both understood that—but here he was, fulfilling a baseless stereotype of black masculinity in the most dreadful way possible. But amidst my

revulsion at his betrayal, not just of me, but of the black men he represented, lay guilt—pure guilt, unfettered by any self-forgiving excuses— that I almost hated him just as much for bereaving me of a companion as for hurting my friend. This acknowledgement of my terrible selfishness still leaves me slightly stunned at the extent of my own loneliness. Loneliness, in its worst form, that allowed me to abide by an injustice rather than face the consequences of performing the right action. Loneliness, in its purest form, that made me prefer to bear the carelessly insensitive remarks of my peers rather than isolate myself from them.

**Jaw clench. Air chest fill. Spine rigid snap. Handshake over. My friend watched in horror as I dropped my voice to a register that is in fact more like a growl and proceeded to close down on Kristen’s unfortunate and (probably unconsciously) racist sense of humor.**

**‘No.**

**Not like Benji.**

**Or a dog.**

**It’s Kenji**

**and it’s Japanese.**

**Just like me.’**

***(208, Why You Don’t Have to Choose a White Boy Name to Be a Man in This World, Kenji Tokawa)***

On one particular insomniac night, I encountered one of our formidable house mistresses in the kitchen, Miss Ivan. Normally, I would have thought the prospect of telling her anything would have been laughable, if not downright stupid. But tonight the lines of her face were softened by the kitchen light into something resembling motherliness, and as she looked up from her files, blinking in concern, the exhausted worry lying dormant in my chest seem to rise up and settle as a lump in my throat. She began to ask me if something was the matter. Out of nowhere, I began to bawl. Great, howling, embarrassingly loud wails, and in between them, haphazard fragments about the past few months somehow sputtered through. She hugged me very tightly, the way my mother could not from five time zones away; I had almost forgotten what it was like to be held

like that. There was another crying girl upstairs who deserved this embrace far more than I did—but in yet another moment of selfishness, I clung onto Miss Ivan for myself, grasping at any form of maternal warmth that I could find.

Miss Ivan went to see Eliza the next day. In the weeks following, Eliza maintained a stony silence in my presence. Forgiveness came, surprisingly, from the other girls, who reassured me that it was brave to tell Miss Ivan. Their praise made my guilt sicken me even more. Was it really courage that caused me to break my word, or was I just too tired that night to feel my usual fear at the thought of doing so? And how could I reconcile that small, unanchored, irritatingly confusing part of me that still missed Aki? Doing the right thing, even accidentally, as it turned out, left me with more questions—about race, power, female solidarity, my position at the intersection of the three—than any self-realizing answers.

*I wave goodbye to the maid as I am driven away from the house. Her eyes are no longer red, and my curiosity has diminished. We are heading to the airport. I am finally going home. As the dusty roads and coconut trees fly by, the bubble of excitement grows larger in my stomach.*

*“You have tanned so much,” my grandmother frets, rubbing my arm ruefully.*

*I hold her hand, not knowing how to tell her that my friends will not notice. Where I was headed, back to rain and thatched cottages and winding country roads, my anomaly lay in the presence of color rather than the tone of it.*

### Author's Note

The pieces that I have interspersed my essay with are from an anthology of essays called, 'Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation', which we studied in my Composition class. These essays were geared towards dissecting the nuances of transgressing gender norms in our largely binary world, but I found ideas within them that I felt resonated with my own work. Kenji Tokawa showcases the frustration that arises from continual, minute discriminations, in a way that is familiar to every ethnic minority. Gwendolyn Ann Smith urges us to consider our place in the world, and that our strangeness may be the tether that holds us together rather than the source of our loneliness. As such, these ideas of anger, belonging and insecurity became important concepts for me to evaluate my own writing against.

### Works Cited

Tokawa, Kenji. "Why You Don't Have to Choose a White Boy Name to Be a Man in This World." *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Ed. Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010. Print.

Smith, Gwendolyn Ann. "We're All Someone's Freak." *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*. Ed. Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010. Print.