

Confessions
By Hiba Kamar Hussain

My hometown is beautiful in some ways. I suppose it has that New England charm. Sound Beach is lined with clocks that have been ticking since 1649. Downtown stores are washed in simple white paint that exudes elegance. Sticky bikes are coated with remnants of chocolate soft serve in the summer.

I live in a town where the places are far more authentic than most people. Call me Caulfield because I am surrounded by phonies.

On a regular day, soccer moms in colorful summer dresses sip wine in downtown restaurants. They throw their heads back in laughter--the flighty fake kind that reminds me of chewing on tinfoil. I think they are treasure-hunting for true happiness. They search for an adrenaline rush outside of going to SoulCycle, sitting at an empty dinner table fidgeting with their wedding ring, and pretending to know their children's whereabouts by following them on social media.

The dads recognize the need to escape. As soon as their Friday meetings are over, they load up the flatbed with a motocross bike to feel the wind caress their balding heads. They take the boat out to sea with a cooler of beer and putt away on the tranquil golf course. They wear a Rolex, a dull wedding band, and look forward to monthly business trips that are often more personal than their wives realize.

The kids deal with more problems than mom and dad will ever recognize; Toxic friendships that illicit permanent doubt of their self-worth, short-lived middle-school relationships to make another boy jealous, visiting the hospital after a friend's suicide attempt. Getting outed on Instagram and having no one to talk to. Secretly wanting to get addicted to

alcohol to get sent to idyllic rehab centers. This all covered up by aesthetic Instagram feeds, khakis and polos from Vineyard Vines, and one-size-fits-all jeans and crop tops from Brandy Melville.

But it would be wrong of me to say that there isn't any authenticity in my hometown. I got to thrive in Binney Park.

I belonged to white birch trees even though I was far from white. I was comforted by my turtle-friends to whom I fed leftover bread even though I wasn't supposed to.

I learned how to ride a bike without training wheels after my dad assured me for the hundredth time that he was holding on. I didn't mind though. I rode over the bridge and halfway around the park, all before I forgot to brake and rolled over an unfortunate woman's foot. I apologized like three times, but I don't know if I meant it at the time: I was so excited I made it that far.

I enjoyed July 4th fireworks with my family as my sister plugged her ears with her tiny fingers: The lake was hungry. It consumed the gray ash as it fell from the sky. I let watermelon juice drip like tears into the grass while we watched.

I remember running away from bees when the flowers decided to bloom in the spring. I was trying to play frisbee with my friends. Nature had other plans. We panicked and thought about running home but ran into town to get Dunkin' instead.

I watched as my siblings climbed up the tree with its arms outstretched like a disco pose. I stood on the ground. Heights are not my thing. I don't think they ever will be.

I burned my tongue with overly sweet hot chocolate. My tongue needed the energy after a fulfilling, but emotionally taxing conversation about life, death and spirituality. My best friends and I had just walked past the nearby church and cemetery. My body was numb and the hard wooden benches by the lake didn't help much. But my soul felt alive.

I broke social distancing to take graduation pictures. We stood under the gazebo with the view of the lake and attempted the "jumping in the air" picture at least 20 times. We finally snapped one where no one looked constipated, so we called it a day. The arches of my feet ached but the satisfaction was worth it.

I looked at the lanterns illuminating the park, as my friends and I reflected on our first year of college. The song of crickets and cicadas filled the air. In that moment, it felt like the perfect homecoming.

But it isn't. Because it's frustrating when you realize that you were a phony in a place you considered the most authentic of all.

I spent most of my childhood trying to stay away from who I was... from the very English I spoke.

I learned to say period instead of full stop after my mom taught me some of her British grammar before I learned the American equivalents in kindergarten.

I forced myself to say almond as "ahhh-mond" and salmon as "samon" even though I knew that the "l" deserved to be heard.

I told my mom I didn't want her aromatic curries for lunch and opted for Nutella sandwiches instead.

I started responding to my parents in English instead of Urdu.

And now:

It comes out

Broken

And I'm too embarrassed

To speak.

I spent my days trying to portray myself as reserved and put-together and always polite. Holding open doors. Waiting for other people to finish speaking. Fear of slipping up took over. Because I would feel the need to represent myself and the rest of the people who look like me because people might have never seen a Muslim before. I convinced myself that it was a privilege because I could define how I wanted my faith to be seen instead of the news networks people trusted. But it became a conscious and unconscious burden. And how can you even begin to represent 1.8 billion people when you don't even know who you are at fifteen?

But I found people who understood me among people who never would.

I found the short Italian man with the witty humor. He loved my mom's food and periodically asked for the 'crispy triangles' -- more commonly known as chicken samosas. He showed me the room with the soft buzz of analytical chemistry machines, and it became my sanctuary. With him, I spent hours after monotonous high school classes discovering the power of biomedical research.

I found the energetic blond lady that adopted me into the beautiful field of emergency medicine. She transferred over some of her energy by providing me with protein bars—which

were very appreciated at 5 am for twelve-hour shifts that somehow always became fourteen. She taught me how to care for people at their most vulnerable moments. With her, I discovered the extent of my grit during emotionally and physically demanding situations.

I found a group of friends who helped me shed my layers much faster than I could after eating two semesters worth of Popeyes. We've had conversations about the banalities of life while devouring chocolate chip cookies. We've belted out Disney songs with little regard for the ears of our neighbors. And we've frantically driven around town at night looking for the nearest gas station, well aware that most of them would be closed. With them, I discovered the addicting feeling of electric joy.

So, homecomings are bittersweet. Authenticity is hard to find in my hometown and even harder to find within myself.

Boston's indifference to difference is something I find exhilarating. But the relationship between my hometown is still one I value. For now, it's a work in progress and a relationship I'd like to repair. I hope I get there someday.