Ann Punnoose 21W.742

On *not* Being Fresh off the Boat

It was my first day at Irwin M. Altman Junior High School 172 and I was sitting in my seat during the break between a double period of Earth Science. When the bell signaling the end of the first period had rung, Mr. Jacobson told the class that they could mill around, catching up on each other's summer news until the second bell. Because I was new, I didn't know anyone I could share my summer news with. However, I didn't want to stay in my seat. As the new student, wasn't it *my* responsibility to take the initiative and get to know the others in my class? I looked around for someone, anyone who was not in a group. And then I saw her. She was sitting near the windows, watching a throng of girls to her left. She wasn't talking to anyone and I was certain she wouldn't mind my attempts at initiating a conversation. I rose from my seat and made my way to her. She eyed my progress warily and when I was close enough, whispered angrily, "Get away from me."

I walked back to my seat and stared at my notebook, willing away the tears that had suddenly filled my eyes. *Please don't let anyone else have noticed that exchange.* Her delivery had rankled more than the rejection itself. She had sneered at me, her tone a mix of distaste and pity. She had suggested an insult that I felt I should have been aware of, one I couldn't place just then. I tried to imagine what the girl—her name was Deepa—had seen when I had approached her. My plaid shirt was tucked into my Levi's and my hair was tied back in a thick braid. I didn't look all that different from the other Indians in the class.

And then realization sank in. That degrading look she had shot my way had everything to do with her figuring out that in addition to being new to Altman, I was also new to the United States. When I decided to approach Deepa, all I'd seen was that she wasn't in a big group, not

that she was an Indian like me. All Deepa had seen was a newly immigrated Indian looking for another Indian to latch onto for security. My embarrassment deepened as I realized that Deepa had assumed that I was one those Indians who had emigrated directly from India and spoke no English. I wanted to inform Deepa that I had lived in Kuwait prior to my immigration. English had been one of my first languages and I was considered quite sophisticated in my former school. I wanted to say something, *anything* that would convince her I wasn't trying to lean on her for support and that I hadn't gravitated towards her because we shared common origins.

The incident with Deepa made me wary of the other Indians in the class. Long after I'd introduced myself to the other students, I held back from those that looked Indian. I didn't want to seem needy to them. I'd realized that the already "established" Indians—the ones who had been born in the United States or had lived here for a while, were more likely to mock recent immigrants than the acknowledged school bullies. My frizzy hair, dorky clothes and huge book-bag were never in style, but always the target of their laughter.

On occasion, I mentioned that I had immigrated fairly recently. My peers were amazed. Their immediate reaction was to exclaim at my lack of an Indian accent. I rushed to explain that I'd been brought up in Kuwait and had attended schools which taught in English. I'd even mimic the often-mocked Indian accent and ask them if that's what they expected me to sound like. It was. I was quick to distance myself from that accent. I associated it with the Indians who had emigrated from parts of India where English wasn't spoken frequently, who smelt like spicy food and had oily hair.

Other than mimicking the accent, I didn't share my thoughts about Indian immigrants with anyone. I was certain my perceptions were a little exaggerated and I wasn't about to ridicule Indians to non-Indians as I had seen the established crowd doing. However, I contemplated my

immediate denouncement of the Indian accent and slowly, I began to see why Deepa had thwarted my attempt to make friends. Once she'd figured out I was a recent immigrant, she must have assumed I didn't speak a word of English and would depend on her forever if she had shown even a little interest in me. I couldn't decide what I would do as an established Indian-American if a recent immigrant turned to me for support.

I saw that there were two groups of Indians with different immigration histories in the United States, and at that point, I resented them both for making my settling-in more difficult. There were the established Indian-Americans who had either been born in the US or lived here since they were very young, and those who had emigrated directly from India. I didn't think there was any love lost between the two groups. The first group was perhaps embarrassed by the second's inability to fit in and the second group must have resented the first for rejecting them when they tried to approach them socially. As far as I could tell, there were few immigrants who, like me, had come to the US already able to speak English fluently and therefore had an easier time assimilating. The immigrants straight from India seemed to hate me almost as much as the established Indian-Americans.

Eventually, my Indian classmates saw past my dorky clothes and my "recent immigrant" status; they realized that I wouldn't follow them around and that I wouldn't embarrass them with an accent. But I still wondered about their initial reluctance to get to know me. Did the established Indians reject their immigrant counterparts because the latter displayed the characteristics that their non-Indian peers had teased and taunted them about when they were younger? Was calling the recent immigrants fresh off the boat—"FOBs"—the established group's attempt to emphasize that they were more American than Indian? As I grew older, I figured out that the rift between established and recent immigrants wasn't restricted to the Indian

community. In high school, I often overheard Chinese- and Korean-American students ridiculing the FOBs' accents and attire. When my friends were the ones doing the ridiculing, I asked them why they did it. I was curious about how it affected both groups of recent immigrants. I knew that there had to be some retaliation on the immigrants' part, but didn't know what form it took.

As curious as I was about the issue, I was hesitant to ask my peers about their interactions with immigrants from their own ethnicities—I've found it was a sensitive issue. I was afraid of angering people by pointing out that they were unfairly ridiculing others so I broached the question obliquely and that too, to a person I knew to be unfailingly kind to those her peers often dismissed as FOBs. Elizabeth had emigrated from India when she was six years old and attended an elementary school in Chicago. I asked her how she'd been treated by her classmates when she first arrived in school—that experience had to have influenced how she treated immigrants today. Although she was thirteen years removed from the experience, Elizabeth gave an involuntary shudder at my inquiry. Her classmates made it their lives' mission to tease her for being different. Every day was an exercise in humiliation as they ridiculed her oily hair and her brown skin, and accused her of smelling like curry. She was often the butt of many unsavory jokes in a school where Indian immigrants were in the minority. They laughed at her clothes, which were chosen by her parents and never quite approached the current fashion ideals. As a result of all the Indian-bashing she had had to endure, Elizabeth made it a point to seek out the recent Indian immigrants in her classes to make them feel accepted, regardless of their success at assimilation.

Elizabeth, I found, was the exception rather than the rule. Like the students of Indian descent that I'd attended school with, most Indian-born Americans hated the sight of the more recent immigrants. Robin, my cousin who was born and raised in New York, was the more

typical example. As a second grader, he was constantly asked the whereabouts of his turban and curry, “No curry for lunch today, Robin?” was a refrain he associated with lunchtime until middle school. Unlike Elizabeth, Robin doesn’t try to help recent immigrants. He teases and taunts them just as he was teased and taunted because now, as a junior in high school, it makes him laugh. When I asked him why, he replied “Because they’re FOBs and I don’t like them.” To my repeated questioning, all he would say was “They walk around wide-eyed, clueless about what’s going on. Who wouldn’t hate that blank look on their faces?” The blank look makes the immigrants, the closest representatives of India that non-Indians have, seem vapid and mentally absent. Perhaps Robin dislikes them so much because they exemplify all that he was teased for when he was younger.

I think the blank look is more a shield that protects what *is* going on inside rather than a window to nothing. I’ve seen that look on many of the Indian immigrants who arrived at schools speaking little or no English. At Altman, I was teased by bullies who thought I would be an easy target. I wasn’t. I told them to leave me alone—perhaps not as elegantly as someone who had lived in the US longer, but I got my point across and I didn’t cower in front of them. Cowering, is exactly what I saw most of the Indians do when the bullies got around to them. These were also the students who naïvely approached the Indian-American students for companionship before realizing they were simply FOBs to Indian-Americans.

The bullies, who weren’t necessarily of Indian descent, knew of the friction that existed between the FOBs and the established Indians. Teasing often involved pointing out to one that another FOB liked her. In middle school and high school, I saw many recent immigrants merely stare at their feet and stoically bear the taunts. At their cruelest, these bullies would approach an established Indian-American and inform her (or him) that some FOB had a crush on her. In

response, there would be a chorus of "eeew"s and laughter at the FOB in question. Implicit in this taunt was the suggestion that no one could possibly find a FOB attractive and furthermore, the FOBs couldn't help but be infatuated with the cool and sophisticated Indian-Americans. A group of my Chinese-American friends, while discussing the type of people they would date, mentioned that they could *never* date one of those FOBs. "Their accent alone would make me feel as though I were dating my father. It would be like incest or something." my friend Xing explained, as a couple of the FOBs hurried past with their high-water jeans and tight T-shirts.

Some recent immigrants "recognized" that their clothes and manners were their liabilities and rushed to correct them and in retaliation, formed their own cliques. Others simply withdrew from their peers. Two other Indian girls had enrolled in Altman around the same time I had and we traveled to and from school together. However, they weren't fluent English speakers and so were put in the less advanced class along with the bullies and their cronies. Della and Ancy were teased mercilessly, and soon I noticed that they had become quiet, talking only to each other and withdrawing from everyone else. They had realized that if they kept their expressions carefully vacant, they could pass unnoticed through the bullies' as well as the "cool" Indians' FOB-torturing radar.

Once I was secure enough in my place at middle school, I tried to seek out the recent immigrants and talk to them—to be the established Indian who eased their life in the United States. It was easy to mistake my empathy for pity and condescension. I wasn't completely innocent of either, but I was adamant about offering assistance. Near the end of my first year, another Indian student enrolled in one of the non-honor eighth grade homerooms. I dragged one of my friends along with me as I scoured the playground for him at lunchtime. When I finally found him, I tried to talk to him about his classes. He wasn't interested and eventually

communicated that I should leave him alone. I couldn't understand. I would have loved to have someone who appreciated my background talk to me when I immigrated. Perhaps he saw that I too had once ridiculed the immigrants who came directly from India, laughing along with others at their accents and hair.

At times however, the recent immigrants became my tormentors, laughing at me as they stood in their hallways cliques and calling me a "herb" as I walked by, trying hard for invisibility. I couldn't understand why *they* were making fun of me. I remember thinking once that I was too American by their standards and not American enough by those of the established Indian-Americans.

The antagonism between ethnically similar people with different immigration histories does not end in middle school or high school. At MIT, I've seen Indian-American undergraduates, the established ones, mimic the accents of and laugh at the Indian graduate students, often immigrants from Indian institutions. As my conversation with Robin suggested, the teasing might exist because they too were teased when they were in elementary school and have been schooled to think that accents and different ways of dressing are grounds for ridicule. Or perhaps, they tell themselves that they're toughening up the FOBs, preparing them for worse teasing from other ethnic groups.

In the early days of immigration, when the number of immigrants from Asian and African countries was closely monitored and subject to quotas, American-born children of immigrants were in the minority among their black and white peers. These first generationers ate different food, spoke languages other than English and dressed differently from their peers, and therefore it was easy to set them apart and laugh at them. More recently, as immigration quotas

were eased and laws made more just, classrooms have become more diverse, consisting of students who are black, white and many of the shades in between, all considered American. Classrooms also contain students who are immigrants themselves and because these students are less removed from their original countries than the American-born ones, they become the obviously different students, taunted by the ethnicity-indifferent bullies for their differences and ridiculed or ignored by the established students of the same ethnic origins for exhibiting the traits of foreigners.

In 2005, I will have been a resident of the United States for ten years and a citizen for four. I am an *established* Indian-American now and still learning to use that position. As I walk the hallways at MIT, I pass many ethnically Indian students—Indian-Americans and recently immigrated Indians. My immediate response is to stare straight ahead as though I have not seen them. I hesitate to make eye-contact, convinced that the Indian-Americans will think I'm still a fumbling FOB and that the recent immigrants will read my smile as one of insincere pity from an immigrant who switched sides and laughed at them. The latter aren't all wrong. Sometimes, I find myself searching for cover when I see a recent immigrant; I don't want them to seek me out for support. I try to curb this impulse, but along with trying not to dismiss the more established-than-me American Indians simply for being established, it is difficult.