

# The Un-Gifted Façade

***A first-hand account of why so many highly capable kids hide their gifts.***

by Kyla Matagi

**I took a seat at the front of the class.** My leg bounced so quickly as I waited in anticipation for the teacher to begin that I was lucky I didn't drill a hole through the floor. I'd heard the curriculum in middle school was much more difficult and the prospect of a challenge excited me. Ms. S's intro was enthralling. She had spent her previous years teaching in inner city New York, and made it clear that there was nothing we could do to scare her. From my patch of suburbia, there was something exotic in that. As we drummed past the first days and began settling into a rhythm, I found that she was laid back, a little crass, and made everyone feel like she had his or her back. Except for me.

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The books she assigned were slim and the material easy. We were placed in discussion groups, but when I brought my thoughts to the table, they were met with irritation. It wasn't a time for in-depth analysis—it was social hour. My classmates faked it when Ms. S strolled by our table, but that was the extent of their engagement. I found myself disappointed at best, resentful at the worst. I came hungry and left hungry. Classmates mocked my habit of breathing in the bindings of old books, which started a new bit: the ostensibly amusing accusation that I was horny for old men, who smelled as bad as the books. I failed to see the humor. I failed to see the humor in a lot of things, apparently. Which must explain why, as we squandered valuable class time matching classmates to characters in *The Office* (a television show I'd never seen), my crush cast me as Angela.

He was a skater, with bright eyes and dark, wavy hair and, for a moment, I was simply excited he knew my name and picked me to be part of his cast. But as I noticed the class's snickers and my teacher's I-should-be-hiding-it-but-I-totally-agree smile, I realized it wasn't a good thing. When I got home and watched the show, I was devastated. Angela's character was essentially a caricature of puritanical negativity.

*Fantastic.*

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Despite this, I still had friends. Some I held onto from elementary school, but others were new, and for a time I was happy with my group. But as the weeks rolled on, they left me behind, one by one, as they slid smoothly into their niches in the middle school machine. Most were good at sports or music, and few had trouble picking up admirers. I was pricked by jealousy. I tried to ignore it, but generally failed. I felt like a busted gear, and feared that if I didn't smooth my gnarled edges to fit in, I would be replaced entirely. There was one new friend I was growing close to by the end of the year (we'll call her D) who had a cool and confident demeanor. D was talented, opinionated, and seemingly bulletproof. I wanted to be like her. Whenever she tossed me scraps of advice, I scrambled for them.

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One time when I was struggling to get the boys in our group to help out on our group project, she said, "You know, they'd listen a lot better if you took your hair out of that ponytail and put on a mini skirt."

I was baffled. Was she kidding? No, she wasn't. I began to pay more attention to the girls that the boys liked. I realized she was right. Those girls didn't have their hair slicked back to their scalp and secured with colorful clips. They wore it loose around their shoulders. They didn't wear awkward layers and lengthy hems. Their skirts and jeans slung low on hips they seemed so comfortable having. Those were the kind of girls who could get by with ease. Who only got laughed at because they wanted to be, not because they were stuffy.

"You're so pretty," D told me. "You could be such a whore if you wanted to."

I didn't want to be a whore, but I also didn't want to be the girl that boys used as a stepping-stone to get to their pretty friends. I began soaking up teen soap operas, paying special attention to the cheerleaders and the prom queens, and began crafting a persona. She was bubbly, and somewhat ditsy. She used smaller words and laughed at the right jokes. She was bold, prone to the occasional outburst, and while she could be superficial, she had a big heart. It was fun, drafting up this character. It felt like a combination between novel writing and theater—two things I loved. The act provided me with a bit of distance from myself. If I was laughed at, it wasn't really *me* that was getting laughed at. It was my character, and I was simply delivering a line. I pretended not to understand things that I really did. I got upset about things that I knew didn't actually matter. I had manufactured laughing fits. I imagined that I was endearing and silly, with a fun dramatic flair. In retrospect, I came off more as erratic and self-absorbed.

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But even with all of that, it wasn't what I imagined. I remember trying to have an art talk with a boy in one of my classes. When I waited for his reply, he stared at me stupidly before saying, "What? I wasn't listening. I was just imagining having sex with you."

I should have understood right then that my artificial persona was getting me nowhere, but I didn't. I believed this degradation preferable to being perceived as shrewish, awkward, and boring. So, my response? Cue the smile. Give an easy going laugh. Don't act like it bothers you. Prepare to repeat. I wish I could call this incident isolated, or uncommon. It wasn't, and it's not. Other highlights on the list include hearing myself on the list of "bangable" girls in my ninth grade science class, having my butt smacked in the hallway, getting asked if I was a "day walker" or a "chestnut", and being invited to a high school party that was secretly an orgy.

My only sanctuary was the art room. I used paint, loud music, and handwritten words scrawled across endless pages of notebooks to fill up the parts of myself that felt empty. I wrote to understand my own feelings, and I painted to purge them, all the while trying to keep my passions subtle enough to pass under the radar.

In my English classes, I learned to flip my papers over as soon as I received them to hide the A's and avoid the look that said, "Oh, you're one of those". I groaned about unfair point docking and boring material. In truth, though, I always wanted a teacher to challenge me.

Instead of handing back my papers covered in red-penciled stars and exclamation points, I wanted them to tell me how I could get better. I wasn't even convinced they were paying attention. In my sophomore English class, I wove lyrics from Donna Summer's "She Works Hard for the Money" into an essay about Quakers, hoping to raise some flags. All I got was a single question mark, and an A.

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*She said that I had a gift, and that I needed to use it.*

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I gave up hope of ever having an engaging English class experience. Then I entered my first creative writing class. While the class didn't provide me with a challenge, it provided me with freedom, which felt just as good. Every newly assigned poetic form felt like a puzzle, and I was ready to solve them all. When the teacher assigned our first short story, I asked if there was a page limit. She gave me the minimum, and laughed when I told her it was the maximum I was worried over. A few days after I turned in the assignment, she pulled me aside, teary eyed. She

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shared with me about a personal loss, and told me that my story had helped her come to terms and feel the beginnings of peace.

She said that I had a gift, and that I needed to use it. I'd been told that before, but the tears in her eyes gave the words new weight. I couldn't shrug them off with the same level of ease I had in the past. I loved what I was doing in that class. The person who wrote those words was a far more authentic version of myself than the girl who sent out a mass text promoting herself for the next round of the homecoming royalty vote.

I began to feel, for the first time in a long time, like there was nothing wrong with that. In that silly, seventh grade English class, I'd learned that being different would cause pain. Truthfully, my persona had hurt me more, though I was afraid to admit it. The idea of having my true self needed was much more frightening than the chinks I received in my false armor.

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D began nagging me about a boy whose attention I seemed to have. She said that if I didn't ask him out, she might. I should have understood her subtext, but I didn't. I couldn't read the game. After all, I was a faker, and not a very good one. I thought this was another coaching moment, and that she was trying to push me out of my shell just a little further. I asked him out on a group date to a festival. I told her I'd done it, and her look was unexpectedly sharp.

At the festival, he got a text from D. She was there too, and wanted him to come say a quick hey. He told me he'd be right back. I found the two of them a couple hours later, ducked behind the bushes, drug paraphernalia strewn about them. I went home dateless and confused.

That Monday, a friend told me that D had been talking about me in another class. "She's a whore," D had said, "and she deserves whatever she gets."

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I finally learned. My years squandered as a poor imitation gave me everything I never wanted, and nothing that I did. I drew away from D, and others. I realized that it was time to reclaim myself. I began to write and paint with more purpose and I stopped being so afraid to share my creations. I was asked to paint the portrait of an orphan girl, which was delivered to her in Guatemala, and to work as an assistant art teacher at an elementary school. My art was displayed in a college art show, and hung on the walls of the city hall and a local café. I entered a poetry

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contest and received a \$500 scholarship toward my college education, and was invited to give local readings of the work. The sense of achievement I felt in those spaces meant so much more than any credit to my superficiality had.

I let myself be a little lonely for a while as the price of being a little more “me”. I found others hanging out in the art room after hours, or skipping out on parties in favor of their passions who were just the same. Though our passions often differed, I shared more similarities with them than I would have guessed. My relationships came easier with them than they did with the peppy social climbers. They made me feel accepted, and inspired me to find my drive.

I decided on a university—something I hadn’t been sure I’d bother with. During the three years I spent completing my bachelor’s in English, I had six pieces of writing and two pieces of art published in university literary journals. Among these publications I was asked to give readings for four of them, awarded first place in poetry and third place in prose. I got to see both my art and my writing decorating university hallways. I had a professor ask if he could hang one of the poems in his office, saying that it may have been the most thoughtful piece of undergraduate work he had ever seen. I worked on the editing staff of two journals, and edited a professor’s paper for publication in a philosophical anthology. In my senior year, I was one of two students from my university nominated for a statewide competition to attain a writing mentorship, and graduated cum laude. I made lasting friendships, and found a love that loves me at both my strongest and my weakest. He believes in my passions, and often reminds me to do the same when I still struggle. I learned strength, I discovered belonging, and I recovered my voice.