

# We Were Our Own Hometown Heroes

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My recollection of first meeting Sabina is hazy, as most of my childhood memories are. But I can remember standing in that locker room on what had to be either the first, second, or third day of seventh grade, and how it reeked of sweat and sports bras and I still don't know if that locker room was pink, but whenever I try to recollect it in my mind, I see those lockers encapsulated by a haze of coral, and it mildly infuriates me to know that I will never be able to confirm if my recollection is accurate or not. But I remember being twelve and only three months prior having been sent hurtling against my will out of a previous world where I saw the same twenty-five or so people every day and had to walk in an orderly fashion every time we all left the classroom, then plunged into this strange universe where suddenly a pasty concoction called "eyeliner" just seemed to appear on every girl's face in that lull between the end of sixth grade and the start of middle school.

But in that locker room, my eyes were still naked and my near-invisible blond lashes, cursed upon me along with the devil's curly red hair, were bereft of any black goo and I remember shoving my awkward, boyish body on the cusp of teenage rebellion into an ugly navy blue-on-light blue gym uniform that donned the words "North Penn" on both the tops and the bottoms. I remember tentatively treading steps on that gymnasium floor which echoed with the sound of every sneaker squeak captured on its surface. And I remember Sabina sitting on that squeaky floor with the rest of my gym class, though a little farther away from where they were most concentrated, talking to some other girl I knew from some other class I had that year. I recognized this other girl and felt comfortable starting a conversation with the two of them, and at some point during this time one of us must have said "Hi, I'm Sabina," and the other one must have said "Hi, I'm Brianna," and, unbelievably, that interaction was almost a decade ago.

Sabina always had curly hair, but when she was in middle school, she straightened it. We all did, because feminine perfection was in the form of locks that lay flat on our scalps and didn't ooze one ounce of volume. Back then, only the ugly girls on television sitcoms had big, unruly hair. In middle school, Sabina's signature look was a graphic tee from Delia's paired with a pair of light blue skinny jeans that had maybe one or two holes in them, and she layered her ninety-nine cent eyeliner on her bottom lids so many times that it transformed her into Raccoon Girl Extraordinaire. She had a warm, goofy smile with two front teeth that seemed to overshadow the rest, and light caramel skin gifted to her by her home country of Israel.

In the months after our first encounter on that hallowed ground, I learned that not only did she live down the street from me and that we were both budding Jewesses, but that her weirdness near perfectly complemented my own. Sabina loved screaming in the middle of the street for no good reason other than to startle random passers-by; she loved making unholy gurgling noises and poking my sides and staring at me just to give me the creeps until I'd tell her to cut it out; she loved shouting the lyrics to songs she only half knew and proudly filling in the gaps with words and phrases that didn't make any sense, but she confidently crooned them as if knowing what the artist had intended all along. Sabina liked to do things that made me uneasy, made me test the boundaries of my comfort zone. She was insecure like the rest of us, but she seeped this kooky self-assurance that dripped from every pore on her body and she always pushed me to stretch my limits as a sheltered only-child. All those years of being told by classmates, who didn't yet understand the concept of having a filter, that it wasn't cool to be the weird kid were only leading up to the moment when I finally met someone who wholly embraced me and all my weirdness.

After Sabina and I came together, it felt like we owned our hometown. Everything within the limits of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, was our kingdom and we ruled with two tiny iron fists. We paved paths down railroad tracks and sidewalk cracks like they belonged to the bottoms of our feet, and everywhere we went we brought the chaos of our youth with us. We made messes in thrift stores trying on dresses from a bygone era that even our own mothers wouldn't have worn, and we started verbal fist-fights with the other kids in my neighborhood when we hung out at the ratty old park up the street from my house just for the fun of it. We flourished in the winter when we didn't have to worry about our straightened-out hair frizzing up from humidity, when the streets were barren of civilians and were ours for the conquering. We watched our breath become gaseous before our eyes and played pretend as upper-class socialites with cancer sticks stuck between our middle and index fingers, taking one diamond-encrusted drag after the other like every tween does back when they're young enough to think that smoking is the essence of cool.

For a short period of time, we even carefully tracked the course of security cameras in Rite Aid so we could get away with filling up our pockets with pilfered makeup and candies like a couple of poor street children from a Charles Dickens novel. And though Sabina eventually paid the price for being caught in an attempted thievery of a cheapo stick of drugstore eyeliner on Halloween with community service at the local Boys & Girls Club, missing out on costumes and free candy that year, and, of course, learning a lesson, our fun was not diluted. Sabina's heart was as soft and warm as a latke on the first night of Hanukkah, however, and shoplifting Swedish Fish from a convenience store was not a true reflection of who she was. We were all teenagers with impulse control levels set to "self-destruct", but we were also just good kids figuring shit out along the journey to maturity that came with many obstacles, such as constantly

being unsure of what our proper bra size was, letting go of fake friends who didn't support our choice to wear a Hot Topic tutu to school, and deciding whether or not to start a social media war with "that bitch" on Myspace. Sabina could be the most annoying little dick head, or the biggest asshole this side of the Mississippi, but when the dust cleared and the angry text messages settled, there was always a friend on the other side of all the emotional rubble, still sticking around for the bad jokes and questionable decision-making, for the gossip-filled phone calls, and for the hugs I needed when the guy I made eye contact with for a split second in math class ended up rejecting me. We clashed more times in our three years at Penndale Middle School than the number of times we cried in public and wet mascara tattooed our cheeks, but we always found our way back where we belonged, getting water ice on Broad Street in our t-shirts and short shorts, or taking amateur photo shoots of ourselves with crappy cameras anywhere we thought had reasonably good lighting.

My recollection of first meeting Sabina is hazy, but my recollection of embracing her petite frame with my own at the end of her driveway, at eight in the morning the summer before starting high school, and watching her car power down that cul-de-sac road, is as clear as the feeling of how empty the rest of high school felt without her. But despite the fact that I could never understand what must've gone through her head when she traded depressing, concrete winters and loitering in Forever 21 for tanned skin and beautiful beaches in warm, sunny South Carolina, I will always understand why she continued to stick around from over 600 miles away. Sabina was everything I loved and hated about growing up, and with everything I loved and hated about growing up, Sabina came along for the ride. The worst thing she ever did to me was cut my bangs too short in eighth grade, making me look like Friar Tuck through all the months it took for them to grow back out, and I screamed at her when she put down those household scissors and I saw not only the realization that she had messed up my face, but I saw myself in the mirror after she butchered my hair as if Leatherface had waved his chainsaw haphazardly across my forehead. But then Sabina laughed, and then I laughed, and I realized that I was only stuck with this hair for a little while but she was stuck with me for good. Sabina embodied all this young adult disarray and more, and through all the fuck-ups and follies of our adolescence, we still pick each other off the ground and say "Let's fuck up again."