

STEPHANIE JONES

## 1. JAGGED EDGES

*A psychosocial exploration by one who "made it"*

A HIGH SCHOOLER

Peering sideways  
breaking the slunch of my cocoon  
I wait.  
I watch.  
At the bottom of the hill  
leading to our trailer.  
Smiling foolishly  
I jump.  
I enter.  
Too fast as usual into the carload of kids.  
Reddening face  
Hoping they don't notice or don't care  
I listen.  
I look.  
Riding through tree-lined streets  
envying mansion-like homes and worldly talk.  
I withdraw.  
I suspect.  
Diminishing trust, or hope for trust  
sitting quiet in the slunch of a cocoon no longer mine  
and still peering sideways.

A KINDERGARTENER

Merthiolate. The single memory I have from Kindergarten that can be conjured up at the most surprising moments is screaming at the top of my lungs on the corner across from my school as my mom held up my dress with one hand and dabbed bright orange merthiolate all over my skinned legs with the other. The sponge-like applicator that danced across my damaged limb came in a threatening dark brown bottle that promised – and delivered – an excruciating burr. I don't remember where my brother was while I jumped around on my toes with my mom yelling at me to stand still and getting more frustrated by the minute. But I know that he was sitting next to me when we were still in the car. The story has been told many different ways and two go like this: 1) I was too excited and anxious about getting

to school and I opened the door and fell out before the car stopped; 2) I was excited about getting to school and I unlocked the car then my brother opened it up and gave me a shove. Each version of the story has something about me being "excited" to get to school and both end with me holding onto the door for dear life as my mom slowed the car to a stop.

And then the merthiolate.

And the screaming.

My mom calmly walked me into my classroom that morning, my face tangled and wet, my legs missing skin and stained orange. She kissed me goodbye and left me standing there with wide eyes. I don't know what happened between that time and when she later came back to get me. She has told me that her "nerves were shot" after I fell out of the car and she was just moving through the motions of the morning routine when suddenly it occurred to her that she left me at school skinless and silent. Jumping in her blue Pontiac LeMans and speeding back to Sharpsburg Elementary School in Norwood, Ohio, she signed me out and took me home.

Home was somewhere in Norwood I imagine – maybe with my great grandmother, Granny, who had the tallest bed with the softest feather ticking you've ever felt. We stayed with her some, I do remember that, but I'm not sure that we ever really lived there. Maybe home was the apartment on Montgomery Road where my grandmother recently told me she forced my mother to move out of when she visited one Saturday morning in the winter and the hallway floors were covered with ice and all of us were cold because the building didn't have heat.

My mom was a single mother. I was four. John was two. She did everything she could to be independent including working two full-time jobs, living in ice-draped apartments, and dropping me off at school with orange-dyed legs and tear-swollen eyes. She probably had to go to work the morning I fell out of the car and the frustration grew as she thought about missing a day's pay and what would have to be left unpaid as a result.

The year was 1976 and children had to be five years old before entering kindergarten unless they were able to pass a qualifying test to enter as a four-year-old. I was four until my birthday in October. I passed the test. Maybe because public school was cheaper than childcare, maybe because my mom thought I was anxious to get to school and that I was (naturally) brilliant, maybe because of a complex combination of these and other reasons. Anyway, I entered kindergarten at age four in a tiny building that was made especially for kindergarteners.

The child's garden. Separate from the other children, separate playgrounds, separate entryways, separate hallways, separate principals.

Separate. Protected.

A place to grow into a person who might enter the institution of school and manage to climb up the social class ladder – the one missing rungs near the bottom – the one with oil-slopped rungs toward the middle – the one with prickly-thorned rungs on the top.

## A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLER

Glimpsing, feeling, touching, emoting class difference, class inferiority, from the inside out of adolescent social groups is filled with anxiety as I study the specimens around me in the unbearable Florida heat with intense curiosity. I focus on the words they use, their faces as they speak, the way they wear their hair, the clothes on their bodies, how their bodies move, how they greet one another, how they look at me, how they look at each other. I am an ethnographer attempting to piece together some knowledge of this foreign landscape in which I find myself, fitting no better than an overgrown pumpkin in a vineyard, and yet my existence is at least as obvious to each of the refined beings around me. I am not critical in the sense of seeing societal structures that afford class stratification and class discrimination, but critical in the sense of finding fault in myself, in my mother, in my siblings, in my home, in my upbringing, in my education, in me and those before me. I am not, therefore, intellectually positioned to produce multiple readings of the social and political nightmare unfolding in front of me, within me, but instead I ache to change, to become like them, to talk like them, move my body like them, live like them, to transform myself by any means necessary into them. And that means leaving me and anyone like me in the shadows.

In these suspended moments of inquiry and intense study the gym teacher yells for us to begin our laps around the baseball diamond and I do as I'm told. Brown dust rolls behind me as I jog down the third base line alongside the school parking lot and a sudden pressure on the top of my head stops me in my tracks.

"What was that?" I mouth to no one in particular since no one is paying attention to me anyway.

Right hand instinctively moves to the source of wonder.

Hair.

Witness.

Goop.

Eyes and mouth open wide.

"Oh my God!"

Great. Just great. Could this *possibly* get any worse?!

Seagulls fly overhead belting out their cries, and, apparently, dropping off their shit along the way. Lucky me, I saved one white and black mess from soiling the baseball diamond.

How, may I ask, is it that a flock of seagulls flies over a group of kids who get taken to school in the mornings by parents driving shiny Jaguars, Mercedes, BMWs, Bentleys, and Porsches, and the only student who gets shit on is the new girl whose family just moved their 1974 Volkswagen Beetle across four state lines inside the back of a U-Haul truck along with their mattresses, underwear, and pots and pans?

How could it be that the overly self-conscious, feeling somehow cheated, humiliated girl with bird shit in her hair experiences such injustices in the world while the others continue to run obliviously around the bases?

Life sucks.

At least at school.

## AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLER

Renee, my best friend in the fifth and sixth grades wasn't allowed to play at my house, a different trailer than that depicted earlier, but one that was situated in the back of a park in rural Ohio. I went to her house all the time. Don't think she ever stepped inside mine. She was never able to see that my home was impeccably clean and organized – my mother has always been a bit of a neat freak – but instead we lived our friendship and she imagined the inside of my home in her own way. This imagined state of my living was likely informed by her mother's perception of how trailer park people must live, the very perception that kept her from allowing her youngest daughter to play inside my house.

Three important things I learned in school:

1. Money matters.
2. Status goods matter.
3. Where you live matters.

I didn't learn in school that race mattered, at least not really. I knew that my family teased me about my "Black boyfriends" referring to my first crush in kindergarten and another in fourth grade. I didn't want to date the guy in my chemistry class who kept asking me out, but I was attracted to other guys in my school who were Black. Either way, I knew that it would make a difference to someone in my family or in my peer group if I dated a Black guy, but I didn't learn that *my* race mattered for a very long time. I figured that out much later in life, and I continue to understand that the most salient piece of one's identity within a particular context is what we learn about most quickly. For me, it has almost always been class, followed distantly by the complexities of gender, race, sexuality, and religion depending on where I was and who I was with.

For others, it depends.

Tameka, my daughter's friend in kindergarten, was coming home with us one day after school when she said to me, "You are both White and I am Black."

I looked at her and said, "Hmmm. What do you think about that?"

Thoughtfully and in a matter-of-fact tone she responded, "I think it matters." Then she ended the conversation, smiled, and began skipping with my daughter down the hallway.

And so goes one of five-year-old Tameka's lessons from and perhaps about school, and thus the extended tentacles out to society: race matters.

But in an all-White classroom in the fourth grade, it was my class status that crippled me, made me tremble, flushed my face. I walked quietly and self-consciously across the white tiled floor and past the rows of desks to the shelf where the SRA box was waiting. Slide one card in, pull another out. No one else was moving, only a couple people looked up from their seats. I was fast at this SRA stuff. I knew it and they knew it too. But I hated walking in front of everyone thinking about the outfit I was wearing and the way my hair stuck out behind my right ear in a big puffy uncontrollable wave. My hair was nothing like Theresa Miller's hair, and everyone liked Theresa Miller's hair. I looked slightly down at the floor and made my way back to my desk silently, stealth-like, ninja-style. Good. No one was looking. Good.

## A HIGH SCHOOLER

The sun beat down ruthlessly as I marched across the spacious and vulnerable lawn of the outdoor Florida high school campus that was framed by one-story brick buildings. Doors hung open in fifteen feet intervals revealing classrooms filled with rows of chair and desk combinations and a teacher at the front of the room. I stepped into the shade of the canopy that covered a walkway and made my way to the classroom where I first learned about beakers and chemicals and where I memorized the table of elements and slouched in a chair staring dreamily into the dark afro in front of me. Today I was on a mission – no attending class, no slouching or dreaming, no goggle-wearing or chemical mixing. It was a new semester and a new day, and though Mr. Ramirez held my attention impressively throughout chemistry, I was not going to follow through with his recommendation that I take physics. Stepping up and into the laboratory-like room, I handed him a piece of paper that indicated I was intending to drop his physics class and do something else with that forty-two minutes of my life each day. Mr. Ramirez (who was about forty years old, dark-complected, good-looking, and the food for my fantasies of marrying off my mother to a middle-class man who could provide her with an easier life) pushed his moustached lips together, shook his head and said something like:

“Stephanie. Don’t do this,” and gave me a long hard look.

“Why are you doing this?”

Another pause.

I can’t for the life of me remember if I responded to him or just sat there staring at his face or my shoes.

“Tell you what, I’ll give you an A. Just take the class. You can do it.”

At the time I had constructed some perverse fantasy in my mind that this “bribe” was to keep me in his classroom as eye candy, or something exceptionally stupid like that. People told me that I was pretty and had since I was old enough to understand words, so nearly everything that happened to me was almost immediately designated as a response to my physical appearance. Now, as an educator who has counseled first-generation college students who were on the verge of dropping out, and as someone who has made similar “offers” just to keep students in the line of possibility I reread this historic event differently. I have sat in my office chair pushing my lips together, shaking my head:

“I will do everything I can to make this a good experience for you.”

“Don’t drop out. I will get you through this, you can count on me to do that.”

For the life of me I can’t remember their responses. Perhaps they stared silently at me, or at their shoes, or maybe they shook their head and mumbled something about not fitting in, not being able to manage family and school, not being able to talk in classes where they felt so different. Those details have left me, but the real physical pain of feeling my heart in my toes and knowing that I was about to lose one has stayed with me. Mr. Ramirez must have felt that same pain.

He was trying. He had to know that I was a recent newcomer, that I was from a family headed by a single woman at the time struggling to pay the bills, that I had been teetering on the edge of the abyss for at least two years, that I had the brains



and the motivation but not the know-how to find comfort within school walls. How difficult it must have been to watch me walk out the door with his signature on the paper confirming that I was now officially dropping his course, physics, a course that could have provided me with cultural capital had I thought about applying for college, a course that could have convinced me to pursue science beyond high school, a course that might have helped me find comfort within academic settings.

He knew.

I didn't.

That part of the conversation never happened, but of course it's so clear today.

Even had that conversation taken place, what is a sixteen-year-old who hated school, despised witnessing the privilege of schoolmates, and needed to make every dollar possible to pay for her own clothes, food, shoes, and help with younger siblings and household expenses to do? I needed money, and school was placing too many boundaries around the hours I had for working. I transferred to the district vocational school where I took classes for a few hours in the morning and then left to go to work – to make money – at noon. Mr. Ramirez, in that moment, didn't have a shot at me. He might have convinced me across a number of conversations and across time, but in that space of me smiling and handing over the "drop" slip from the high school office, he didn't have a fighting chance. I was done. Gone.

The multiple, competing, and contradictory narratives of my mobility across social class divides are filled with tense spaces such as that constructed between Mr. Ramirez and myself on that hot Florida day. Near-misses I call them – moments when I might have begun down a path that was foreign to me and most of my family, moments that might have made me miss the carefully practiced beat of walking in working-poor shoes, moments that might have gone either way, though they were in the habit of going in the same direction as the moments for generations before me, moments that constantly threatened to reclaim any stake I had made on the path to mobility. Money and time were always at the center of those tensions for me, two concepts that I found intriguing as a young child but unable to control, at least in small ways, until I was a teenager. Both, however, are forms of capital that work for us or against us in various societal exchanges, and *that* was something I did recognize early on in life, as well as the fact that physical beauty and a feminine demeanor could be used nearly as well as money in most circumstances.

And use them I did.

FRACTURED TIMES ACROSS THE YEARS

Gifted class.	Speech therapy.	Gifted class probation.
No gifted class.	General track.	Vocational School.
Skipped classes.		
Free lunch.	No lunch.	Off campus for lunch.
Hiding for lunch.		
Reading.		
No reading.		

## A (NON)READER

I can't remember a single book I read in all of high school, not one. It seems impossible to me that I escaped without reading a book for class, or at least an entire book on my own outside of school (that would seem more reasonable than me reading a book that was assigned by a teacher). The Holy Bible is something that I do remember reading on my own lying in my bed turning the ultra thin pages carefully one by one as I fumbled through the archaic language and pieced together some idea of a story of Christianity. We had a Bible in our home, but we also had a statue of Buddha and books on astrology, and stories about reincarnation, so when I picked up the heavy Book it was purely out of curiosity that I did so, not out of any moral obligation to anything or anyone. My mom had already said to me many times, "It's one of the best books ever written," and that's how I attacked it. As a book — a story — albeit quite powerful in history and contemporary times, but still a story/book.

I dabbled in some of the Stephen King books that my mom had stacks of, and I occasionally peeked into the *Concise Light on Yoga* book that was given to me as a fourteenth birthday gift by my biological father, and I devoured (and cried over) the snippets of my mom's journals that I could get my hands on when she was nowhere around, but reading a book in high school? Nope. So it's not surprising that I struggled so much when I went to community college: Cs, Ds, Withdrawals, Drops. The first year was like that not only because I wasn't a reader or a studier, but because I had no idea what I was doing — and because there were boys and parties and friends and some freedom outside a full-time job as a waitress — a life I had not really known before that. So I didn't do well. I did horribly in fact, except for the times when I could lean on the things I learned earlier in my academic career:

- Being a good girl was enhanced by being pretty, at least most of the time.
- A five paragraph essay is a solid way to organize an informational, non-narrative text.
- Area can be calculated by multiplying the length of a rectangular shape by the width.
- Wars were fought, but when and where and why and to what end. I had no idea.
- One really can dissect a frog if she puts her mind to something else.
- Two blue-eyed biological parents cannot produce a brown-eyed baby, even though two brown-eyed biological parents can produce a blue-eyed baby under the right conditions. (This was important — my mom had blue eyes, and the person she was married to at the time of my birth also had blue eyes. I had brown eyes. Thankfully, by the time I learned this genetic fact I already knew who my biological father was).

## A PRIMARY SCHOOLER

Mrs. Frame stood me in the corner for most of my first grade year that I spent in a working-class industrial urban neighborhood in Cincinnati. I have no idea why she put me there so often, but I always believed that it was something I had done

wrong – something wrong about me. One day she stood me there for so long that my bladder decided it was time for me to go somewhere else, and as it released dribbles (at first) then streams of urine down my legs, through my socks, and into my shoes, Mrs. Frame found it in her heart (or perhaps in her rage) to allow me to find a restroom.

I hated her.

So many tragic stories constructed within, through, and reflecting on school. What on earth would motivate me to a lifetime imprisonment in the very institution that dealt such pain over and over and over and over again? What was it that pushed me, tugged at me, made me keep going when things looked tough, worse than tough, improbable, impossible, painful, disrespectful?

Mrs. Peck, the very, very old teacher I had in a rural Ohio second grade classroom who retired right after my year with her liked me. She called me pretty. She called me nice. She was cruel to some of the other kids in class but I loved her and I was grateful that she did not make me stand in corners. White hair was always whisked upon her head into a beehive-like hairdo. I was the “teacher’s pet,” a phrase that I learned for the first time that year – teacher’s pet. I liked being her pet. I did. And I liked that somehow during the middle of the year she realized I was a reader and moved me into the higher reading group that was taught by the woman (also really old) across the hall. Can’t remember her name, but I do remember reading round-robin style in her classroom day after day from thick hard-back books that were worn on the edges and had been flipped through many times before my fingers caught the corners.

Mrs. Zimmerman - third grade teacher same school as Mrs. Peck - introduced me to double-ended grading pens. The slim, slippery, silver stick pens that had a blue ball point on one end and a red ball point on the other were the first things that tempted my sticky fingers. I learned to steal in Mrs. Zimmerman’s classroom, but I also learned about being a teacher (perhaps a nasty correlation) as she let me help “grade” the other students’ worksheets they had completed while they sat in their tidy desks that sat in tidy rows that sat in a tidy room. Math worksheets were my favorite and I gleefully marked big X’s on the numbers of the problems that were answered wrong. In the top right hand corner I would write in extra large, curly red print signifying the number of problems missed (-7). It wasn’t until much later in my school career and in my teaching of children that I realized the infinite numbers of ways that such worksheets can be “scored” and interpreted. But in Mrs. Zimmerman’s classroom as I helped grade papers, take letters off of bulletin boards, and stayed inside from recess to help with general classroom cleaning, I began shaping my love for a way of being – a way of working with my hands and my mind inside school (I’ll skip the trajectory of stealing for now, it ruptures the dreamy, smooth, academic mobility narrative too much, no?). My public performances in school reflected that of a good girl: teacher’s pet, smiling, quiet, sweet-natured, steady-working, responsible, trustworthy, believable.

What else did I learn in school?

That being a “good girl” meant getting away with a lot of things:

– Getting out of class by telling outlandish lies that everyone believed



JAGGED EDGES

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w me to

- Somehow maneuvering my way out of certain assignments without punishment
  - Even graduating with fewer than the required number of credits by lying about my previous high school's expectations for graduating.
- Mrs. Stritt, that dear fourth grade teacher of mine that taught upstairs from Mrs. Zimmerman (who tempted and inadvertently led me to stealing), taught me:

*That I was a reader: The Headless Cupid* was the first book I read in her classroom and I still have a copy today. I also discovered Judy Blume that year and devoured every book of hers I could get my hands on.

*That I was a researcher:* I did a report on Japan and my mom and I together (along with the help of a cousin who was stationed with the Air Force in Japan at the time) had a ball compiling interesting facts and pictures. Even as a high schooler I wanted to learn Japanese and bought myself a number of Japanese language books and tapes to help me.

*That I was a dancer:* She taught a clogging class and I ended up being pretty good – most likely because she was the dance teacher and she believed in me.

*That some people (Mrs. Stritt) lived in subdivisions with two-story homes, manicured lawns, and inground swimming pools.* I was shocked and intimidated.

Could it all really boil down to Mrs. Stritt, that fourth grade teacher who smiled and danced in ways that revealed a teensy weensy bit of mania? That salt-and-pepper-haired woman who taught me to clog, clap-clacking my toes and heels to mountain songs? That tall, hovering teacher who first convinced me that I was a reader, a researcher, a dancer, a person worth noticing? How could it possibly come down to this after thirty-six years of a life that has ebbed

and flowed,  
crashed

and sailed

collided

and skirted,

flowed

and

e-b-b-e-d?

Everything prior to my fourth grade year seemed so complex: reading groups, low reading group, teacher's pet, grading papers with red ink, cartwheels in the yard, fights in the street, high reading group, smoking cigarettes, multiplication tables, fishing, helping put up bulletin boards, playing, dreaming. And then there is fourth grade, so clear and simple as if it occurred yesterday: Japan research project, *The Headless Cupid*, Theresa Miller's long beautiful hair, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, SRA, clogging lessons after school, *Supertudge*, Mrs. Stritt's house on a Saturday morning for a rehearsal, the solar system, rows of desks, Iowa Basic Skills Tests, Spanish language learning, UNO, speech therapy, gifted class.

But no, it's impossible that my drive or motivation or willingness or ability came from that year in fourth grade, because every bit of the way I have had to

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claw, scratch, fight, cuss, push, shove, lie, steal, cajole and I wouldn't have had to do those things if it was *really* about being a reader, a researcher, a dancer, a valuable person. "If you would've grown up in a little rich family all the pieces would fit together nicely like a jigsaw puzzle," my mom recently told me, "but instead you grew up in a poor family and we had to jam those pieces together, nothing ever fit."

The jagged edges of the puzzle pieces jab upward violently in every direction, nothing really "fits" comfortably or securely but is rather jammed into place after many near-misses, meretricious episodes, transitions, losses, gains, victories. "Suck up and walk with your head high. You deserve to be there just as much as anyone else," mom told me my entire life until I graduated from college and began teaching. Then she started encouraging me to "buck the system." She knows all too well what it takes to get a break in this people-run world when you're not one of the people who do the runnin', and once I got that break she wanted me to use it toward social justice.

And so I do.

A PROFESSOR

"Good morning, how are you? Are you going to Chicago for AERA?" I stop in the hallway to greet a colleague before walking onto the streets of New York City and confidently hailing a TAXI that will take me to a trendy restaurant for brunch where I will meet another colleague. Planes, four-day-long out-of-town ventures paid for by work, cities across the country and world, fancy brunches. Moments of my life seem unbelievable, embarrassingly rich, and I often do my best to play down the excitement when I'm with my family – sometimes not telling them at all what I do or where I go. To many in my family my life doesn't only *seem* unbelievable, but it is truly not able to be believed, so foreign in concept and day to day reality that it's easier to shake one's head and not think about it at all. Just as it is often easier (and sometimes downright necessary) for me not to think about their daily lives just to get through the work day in the Big City. Until, of course, something happens and I find myself holding onto the door of a moving car and the skin comes off again and again.

It's 2:28 am, Thursday morning. And I cry. I've been lying in bed awake now since midnight, mind swirling – my brother, my daughter's school, my sister. My brother. What is he doing right now? Sleeping? Crying? Screaming? Seizing? I pray. Is it possible to grant him some peace? Give him a break? Help with the bills? He moves two steps forward and gets slung twenty backward – this time it's Intensive Care for uncontrollable and unexplainable seizures. No insurance. Two children. A heart of gold, a mind to be envious of, a body worked over by roofs, oozing charisma, and no lucky breaks.

No good girl femininity to open doors with a smile.

No old boy networks to slide in at entry level.

Just struggling to find the rung missing from the ladder.

I stumble through the dark to my writing desk.

JAGGED EDGES

Tears dribble down my cheeks, my body jolts, my chin folds into itself.  
Eyelashes clump. Head throbs. Nose stuffs up.

I snuffle.

Breathe.

Sigh.

Slow down.

Why am I so far away? Why the fuck am I in New York! Who the hell do I think I am? Forgive me, brother. Forgive me for being selfish.

And I whisper through gritted teeth, a strained voice, closed eyes, "Don't make me pay with my brother's life, please. I can't bear it. Me "making it" should not mean that he doesn't get a shot at it, please. Please give him a chance!"

And the merthiolate gets rubbed over the skinless wounds, and I hurt. But he is the one dangling from the car door now, and I am sitting safely inside the driver's seat with seatbelt fastened, airbags ready, and full coverage insurance.

I cry.

I sob.

I hate.

I resent.

I beg.

I demand.

I hope.

I walk in to work the next morning with a smile on my face, head held high, sucking up when I have to, and peer sideways without speaking when someone suggests not admitting a student who has a solid academic record but started off in community college.

Ouch.

And the burning persists inside that cocoon.

Even after the orange stains have faded.

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