

"senior picture day":
beauty standards and
the struggle to fit in



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It is difficult to justify irrational acts—after all, they are irrational. Thus, perhaps it may seem bizarre to most people that the narrator in “Senior Picture Day” feels the need to regularly squeeze her nose, purely to change its appearance. Of course, teenagers have always been known to do unusual things by nature. However, irrational acts can also be attributed to external factors, not just to the inexperience that accompanies youthfulness. In the case of the narrator, her daily nose-squeezing is spurred by hurtful comments made by her best friend Terri. The reason that the narrator feels the need to squeeze her nose is to fit a certain standard of beauty that doesn’t construe Indian-like facial features as attractive, one that Terri would approve of.

The standard of beauty in the narrator’s case is established based on her location. She lives in California, and accordingly identifies as a Californian. In fact, she reflects this identity in her desired CB handle, as she tells Terri: “When we were in her room, I told her I had decided on Cali Girl as my handle” (31). Terri immediately questions this choice, reminding the narrator of her heritage and describing her own idea of Californian beauty standards: “But you’re Mexican. . . you look like you’re more from Mexico than California. . . I mean, California is like, blond girls, you know. . . It’s just that you don’t look like you’re from California” (31). It becomes abundantly clear from her statements that Terri has an ideal appearance in her mind when she thinks of a girl from California: someone who is ‘blond’ and isn’t visibly of Mexican heritage. Terri eventually specifies what makes the narrator look like an ‘Indian’ when the boy on the CB radio (‘Lightning Bolt’) inquires about the narrator’s appearance, ultimately triggering her irrational nose-

squeezing. According to Terri, the narrator is “. . . really skinny and, uh . . . She’s also sorta flat-chested . . . she also has this, this nose, a nose like . . . like an Indian. . . you know . . . Like powwow Indian” (32). To some, it may not be immediately apparent why these features are considered unattractive, because attractiveness is something that is entirely subjective and largely varies depending on perception. In this case, however, Lightning Bolt’s response is one that confirms the unattractiveness of these traits according to the idea of Californian beauty standards: “ Lightning Bolt laughed on the other end. ‘ Like Woo-Woo-Woo Indian?’ He clapped his palm over his mouth and wailed. A sound I knew all too well” (32). The fact that the narrator considers Lightning Bolt’s laughter and ‘ wailing’ in response to her appearance to be a familiar sound implies that she has witnessed such a reaction before. In this instance, however, it is the breaking point and finally pushes her to do something about how she is viewed.

In a way, the narrator still values Terri’s approval of her appearance, even though she cuts ties with Terri after her rude remarks. She describes how, years later, Terri’s comments still affect her: “ And so that’s how the squeezing began. . . I eventually stopped hanging out with Terri. . . I know it’s been almost four years since she said all that stuff about me, about my nose, but man, it still stings” (32). Through the act of habitually squeezing her nose, she is essentially confirming Terri’s comments about looking Indian. On several occasions, the narrator describes the value she puts into having a narrower nose, one that doesn’t look Indian: “ Every morning with my thumb and forefinger I squeeze the sides of it. . . you might think it’s just a total waste of time, but . . . I do see the difference. . . I look less Indian, and

you can bet that's the main goal here" (30). The fact that she considers having a slimmer, less "Indian" nose suggests that Terri's remarks still carry significant weight, many years later. Thus, the narrator successfully finds a way to fit an established beauty standard, albeit in an irrational and unusual manner.

Though she considers herself to be a 'California girl', the narrator is denied this status on the basis of her resemblance to an Indian and her Mexican heritage. Terri specifically targets her nose and hurts the narrator's feeling after describing it to Lightning Bolt, who also responds in a hurtful manner. Despite cutting off her friendship with Terri, the narrator essentially still holds Terri's opinion in high regard through the act of squeezing her nose daily. Ultimately, it is clear that the narrator responds irrationally to negative comments about her appearance, motivated by her strong desire to fit in.