Where Are You From?

Phoebe Cook
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by

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You could talk about your trailer park home, or upstate New York, or your very large family, and that would be the truth.

But then he might think about dirty, moldy trailers; abusive parents; laziness; mud and that episode of Hoarding: Buried Alive that he saw once, featuring a crusty old man who lived in a trailer filled to the brim with deer heads and lethal weapons.

Instead, you might change it to New York—New York City that is—and your modern apartment with a loft and your fashionable two-child family, and your parents who both work at international law firms and drink soy milk. But you might not be able to pull that off, you think, looking down at your slightly faded jeans and five-dollar t-shirt.

You backtrack, remembering how much your mom valued cleanliness and how she would come home from long days at the Laundromat and scrub the vinyl kitchen floor. You remember her scrubbing—sometimes scrubbing so hard she couldn’t hear you over the swirling suds. You were trying to tell her about your science fair project that went to district and she merely nodded in time with the circular motion of her sudsy hands. You recall trying
to cover up the fact that you couldn’t buy new clothes by always wearing clean ones and tucking in your shirt. You always felt a little more stylish when you tucked in your shirt. Then you look at him.

His shirt is new; you know that because you saw it in a catalog blazoned with the title “New Fall Fashions for 2013!” You know it is new because you did not buy anything from that catalog. His jeans are pressed. His shoes are the white of newly whitened teeth, something else you know all about because it’s something you’ve never had. But he looks earnest, maybe even interested in talking to you, or perhaps, in being your friend. He looks like he might not judge you for living in a trailer home instead of a clean, white house with a picket fence, like he probably did, or maybe he didn’t.

Would he understand what it’s like to walk home in the dark across a city wreathed in cigarette smoke? Would he understand what it means to work at a gas station in order to have enough money to pay the fee to be on the basketball team? Has he ever worked in his life?

Maybe he would understand if the trailer were a small home. It wouldn’t be much, maybe one with a yard in front and a couple of trees. Maybe you could change the number of your siblings from eight to something more understandable, like maybe six or five—still big, but not something that would contract a television series on TLC. You could refer to your clothes as “thrifted” or “vintage” instead of third generation hand-me-downs. You could tell him that you were on the tennis team in high school and that you like his shirt. Maybe if you told him you were a mechanical engineering major, he would understand how much you love solving problems.
Inscape

If you said you were twenty-three, maybe he'd understand how mature you are, but maybe he wouldn't.

So, you just say, "New York."