

## Society's Child

(Janis Ian)

[Verse 1]

Come to my door, baby  
Face is clean and shining black  
as night  
My mother went to answer you  
know  
That you looked so fine  
Now I could understand your  
tears and your shame  
She called you "boy" instead of  
your name  
When she wouldn't let you  
inside  
When she turned and said  
"But honey, he's not our kind."

[Chorus 1]

She says I can't see you any  
more, baby  
Can't see you anymore

[Verse 2]

Walk me down to school, baby  
Everybody's acting deaf and  
blind  
Until they turn and say, "Why  
don't you stick to your own  
kind."  
My teachers all laugh, their  
smirking stares  
Cutting deep down in our affairs

Preachers of equality  
Think they believe it, then why  
won't they just let us be?

[Chorus 2]

They say I can't see you  
anymore baby  
Can't see you anymore

[Verse 3]

One of these days I'm gonna  
stop my listening  
Gonna raise my head up high  
One of these days I'm gonna  
raise my glistening wings and  
fly  
But that day will have to wait  
for a while  
Baby I'm only society's child  
When we're older things may  
change  
But for now this is the way, they  
must remain

[Chorus 3]

I say I can't see you anymore  
baby  
Can't see you anymore  
No, I won't see you anymore,  
baby

"Society's Child", or "Baby I've Been Thinking", was a song written, composed, and recorded in 1965 by Janis Ian. Its lyrics were centered on the then-taboo subject of interracial romance. Ian was 13 years of age when she was motivated to write and compose the song, and she completed it when she was 14.

The lyrics of the song center on the feelings of a young girl who witnesses the humiliation that her African American boyfriend receives from the girl's mother and the taunts that she herself endures from classmates and teachers. It closes with her decision to end her relationship with the boyfriend because of her inability to deal with the social pressure.

In 1964, Ian lived in East Orange, New Jersey. Her neighborhood was predominantly populated by African Americans and she was one of very few whites in her school.

I saw it from both ends. I was seeing it from the end of all the civil rights stuff on the television and radio, of white parents being incensed when their daughters would date black men, and I saw it around me when black parents were worried about their sons or daughters dating white girls or boys. I don't think I knew where I was going when I started it, but when I hit the second line, "face is clean and shining black as night", it was obvious where the song was going. I don't think I made a conscious decision to have the girl cop out in the end, it just seemed like that would be the logical thing at my age, because how can you buck school and society and your parents, and make yourself an outcast forever?

Songwriter and producer Shadow Morton signed Janis to a record contract and made the decision to release "Society's Child" as her first release. Ian's original title for the song was "Baby, I've Been Thinking", but Morton changed it to "Society's Child". It was recorded using six studio musicians.

Leonard Bernstein's producer saw Janis perform "Society's Child" at The Gaslight and scheduled Ian to perform the song on Inside Pop, a television special about new pop music. Largely due to Bernstein's efforts, Verve Records started promoting it in trade magazines and many radio stations picked it up. But some radio stations, such as Chicago's WLS, refused to play the song. Though several radio stations were slow to add the song to their playlists, this behavior extended the record's airplay life. Recorded in 1965 and released in 1966, "Society's Child" did not enter Billboard's Top 40 until June 17, 1967. The single was #1 or within the top ten in several key cities across America, but in July, it stalled at #14 on the Billboard Hot 100 owing to resistance in certain markets, as was the fate of several other controversial pop hits of the era. With the skin colors reversed for each gender, the Stories's version of "Brother Louie" had no trouble topping the Hot 100 more than six years later.

"Society's Child" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2001.

On October 23, 2011, Ian performed the song with Ryan Adams and Neil Finn on BBC Four's Series 2 Episode 4 of the series, Songwriters' Circle. She stated that she conceived the song when she was 12, wrote it at 13, published it at 14, became known at 15, and was a has-been at 16. The song was released in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the United States. Ian went on to say that a radio station in the 1960s was burned to the ground for playing it and a writer at the Boston Herald was fired for writing about it.