

“Banana”

By Anonymous

“My name is Hannah. Like Hannah Banana,” I announced, fidgeting nervously, to my classmates on the first day of fifth grade in suburban Alabama. I braced myself for impact. Maybe today, I could get past the introductions unnoticed. Unfortunately, the onslaught of questions did not spare me from the cruel spotlight.

“Where are you from?”

“I was born in Washington state.” How else was I supposed to answer?

“No, like where are you *actually* from?”

“I’ve been living in America since I was born,” I responded, hoping that this would subtly convey that I was just as American as any other white American. The message didn’t land.

“Okay, then where are *your parents* from?”

“They’re from Korea.”

“Oh, so you’re Korean! I thought you were Chinese. Is it true y’all eat dogs?”

I was stunned by the attack. This sort of response was not new to me, but every time, it left me defenseless and dejected. As I looked down, I decided to let it go, convincing myself that it could have been worse anyway.

I walked into the bright classroom at my new international school in Korea, uncertain of what to expect. As I looked around at the sea of faces, I felt an odd sense of relief wash over me

as I observed the majority of the students had features similar to me – black hair and brown eyes.

For the first time in a long time, I was not nervous to introduce myself.

“Hello everyone, my name is Hannah.”

“Hey Hannah,” one of the students yelled, rather obnoxiously, “what’s your Korean name?”

I hesitated for a second, considering the implications of the question for a moment. My Korean name was one of my most guarded secrets that only my family was privy to.

“Um, I have one but I prefer to go by Hannah.”

“Oh, well here, we mostly go by our Korean names (written in English). You’re a banana, aren’t you?”

”What do you mean?” I stammered. I had always taken pride in my legal first name, emphasizing that it was “normal” and that it even rhymed with another American word. But now it felt like a personal affront.

“Like a *gyopo*. Oh, I bet you don’t even know what that means.”

I had no idea how to reply, so I forced a laugh as I found an empty seat. A quick Google search later told me that a *gyopo* was used to define an ethnic Korean born in another country: yellow on the outside, white on the inside, like a banana.

“You’re not a true American.”

I had subconsciously accepted that I would always be a foreigner in the U.S. I could speak the language with no accent. I could have an American name so no one could botch the pronunciation. I could watch the same television shows as the other kids to maintain social relevancy and not be “nerdy.” I could throw away my smelly lunch that my mother packed for

me. I could constantly pinch my nose upward and roll my eyes – up, left, down, right – because I naively thought it would make my nose slimmer and my eyes bigger. I rebuffed any chance to learn about my other culture, growing more distant by the day. But despite my attempts, every year, when it was time to introduce myself to a new class all over again, it was as if all efforts to whitewash myself quite literally washed off.

“You’re not a true Korean.”

When I moved to Korea in middle school, I was hopeful that I would be able to find kids, like myself, who also struggled with their perception of their identity. While not all of the students were dismissive of American culture, it was the general consensus that Korean culture was cooler, and it was the new norm. I looked the part, but once I opened my mouth and they heard my Americanized Korean accent or they discovered that I had spent more of my life in America, it was as if I was closer to being a foreigner than one of them.

The subtle jabs and reminders that were thrown at me, from scrutiny for speaking English in public to being spoken to like a toddler, or worse, being laughed at for my Korean, reminded me that there was still a barrier between me and them. It was embarrassing for me to realize how out of touch with the culture I had become. I had to develop new ways to fit in, whether it was by doing my makeup differently to fit traditional Korean beauty standards, watching K-dramas to discuss the plot (but more importantly, the male leads) with my friends, or obsessively watch K-pop music videos to memorize the lyrics to songs I could barely understand at the time. But why was it still not enough?

After years of feeling lost, and changing my personality one too many times, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t going to be constrained to the boxes that others enforced on me that provided them an easier narrative to define me, when my identity is such a personal and specific

concept that should only regard myself. When I was young, it was hard to contextualize the general racism that I encountered, and the identity crisis that followed left me perpetually questioning who I really was. I felt like a fraud who was stuck floating between two worlds, with no foot definitively placed in either and no idea of how to make them connect. Once I grew comfortable with the convergence of two cultures that I was proud to claim, I learned to value my own self-acceptance rather than other's perceptions of me. Now, I am proud and privileged to be Korean American and I truly would not be myself without one or the other.