

A LETTER TO MY BROTHER

My brother. Kuya.

I've been tasked to write something about "Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month." I tried writing a poem. I tried writing a story. I tried writing a speech. But none of these things came together the way I wanted.

So, I've decided to scrap those projects. Instead, I'm writing this letter to you, Kuya. This is a letter about our "heritage."

I realize as I continue writing that I feel good writing this. I want to write this.

In fact, I think this is something I've needed to write for a long time. It's something I think about often, something you and I spend hours on the phone talking about.

The questions: How did we get here? What is our heritage?

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For our white friends in Michigan, our heritage was always about lumpia.

Everything good about our Asianness was wrapped up in this one crunchy Filipino snack. There were two types of lumpia Mom would make for them: Shanghai, which was made with pork, carrot, garlic, and onion; and vegetable lumpia, made with cabbage, green beans, bean sprouts, carrots, garlic, and green onions. These fillings were wrapped in a thin paper made of flour, water, salt, and cornstarch, and fried in peanut oil. The Filipinos we knew loved lumpia, but the white kids we knew lost their minds over it.

"Is your mom gonna to make lumpia?" Our white friends would ask us with crazy eyes after they heard Mom was bringing food for a high school play dress rehearsal. She did always bring lumpia, and the kids would gallop toward her with their paper plates, grabbing multiple pieces from her tin foil container, and slathering them with La Choy Sweet & Sour Sauce.

We liked lumpia before, but we liked it even more now—watching our white friends appreciate it as much as they did. We identified with lumpia. It was, we thought, the part of our Filipino heritage that wasn't

embarrassing. Sometimes our friends would call us “Lumpia.” “Hey, Lumpia!” they’d say. And we didn’t mind. We took it as a compliment. It made us feel likeable.

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You went to high school—and I went to middle school and high school—in DeWitt, Michigan, a small, mostly white city just outside of Lansing. We’d moved to DeWitt from a military base in Germany. DeWitt was a small town with a population of a little more than four thousand. There was one stoplight in the “downtown” area, which wasn’t much of a downtown. There were lots of fields, backroads, and clean, new subdivisions. When we first moved there, you were fourteen, and I was eleven, and you commented on the name of our new city: “DeWitt,” a Dutch surname meaning “White.” Indeed, it was—and continues to be—mostly white. According to the Michigan Department of Education, between 2018 & 2019, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders made up 1.41% of those who attended DeWitt public schools, and white kids made up 84%. When we went to school from 1999-2006, things were even less diverse. This was a huge difference from our school on the military base in Stuttgart, Germany, which, in 2018, was 61% white. I’m not sure what the demographics were when we lived there in the nineties, but 61% sounds consistent with my memory of the place.

Unsurprisingly, we had trouble making friends in DeWitt, Michigan. In addition to being two Asian kids in a small town, you and I were both stout, pimply, and unfashionable, particularly by the standards of our athletic Abercrombie & Fitch counterparts. We were also confused by our surroundings and weren’t sure how to conform. We had come to the U.S. expecting to be in schools that resembled the ones in *Boy Meets World* or *Clueless*, but my middle school and your high school was of the rural-suburban variety we’d never seen on television. There were kids who listened to Backstreet Boys and Offspring, but there were also the kids who were really into Faith Hill and Kenny Chesney, who cared a lot about fire pits, four wheelers, and football. We expected everyone to sound like valley girls or New Yorkers, but most of the kids spoke in nasally “a” and “o” vowel sounds, pronouncing “Mom,” like “Mahm,” or “rap” like “ryap.” This was not what we’d expected America would be like.

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Recently, you reminded me of the time we were walking around our neighborhood and found a dead beaver on the side of the road. We hadn't seen roadkill much at all, if any. We were so sheltered in our little military base life in clean Germany. On the base, we explored our tidy streets and never saw a dead anything. It was idyllic. Then, in Michigan, we saw Death in the open eyes of this bloated beaver crawling with maggots. You and I went to grab a stick to poke at it, until a car stopped and told us to "stop doing that, kids, you'll get sick." You say now that the person in the car probably thought: "These foreigners. What the hell were they thinking?"

We don't know if she actually thought this. She could've been trying to protect us. We have no idea how strange or foreign we seemed to her, and she had no idea how strange and foreign we felt.

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At our school, we constantly had to explain ourselves.

Where are you from?

We moved here from Germany.

Are you German?

No, our parents are from the Philippines, and our dad is ethnically Chinese.

Do you speak German?

No, we lived on an American military base.

Do you speak Chinese?

No, our dad grew up in the Philippines.

Do you speak . . . whatever language they speak in the Philippines? Philippine-ese?

Not really. We understand Tagalog and Bisaya, but we don't speak it.

After conversations like this, the kids at school would slowly back away from us. It was too much for them to understand. It was too much for us to explain. It was baffling, and the complexity of our answer to "where are you from?" drew people away, rather than towards us.

There was a red-headed girl: Emily. She was a new kid too when we moved there. When people asked her where she was from, she'd say: Texas. And people loved to talk to her about Texas. Texas was simple. Texas was neat, interesting. I thought: Why couldn't we have come from Texas?

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That first year, I asked you what I should do to meet people, to make friends. People either looked at us with suspicion or avoided eye contact entirely. I was lonely. You were always better at making friends than I was. You were always better at everything—three years older than me and so much smarter than I would ever be.

You said, "I just make people laugh."

"How?" I asked.

"I make fun of myself. If someone calls me fat, I jiggle my belly. If someone asks me if I know Chinese, I pretend to speak Chinese, and they laugh."

I remember you told me that you sometimes called yourself a racial slur to get people to feel comfortable with you, to acknowledge that you too were aware of your difference, that you too hated yourself for it.

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I did hate myself for my difference during that period—especially between sixth grade and ninth grade. I felt awkward and ugly. I had big round glasses and a mouth full of metal. I had flabby cheeks and long stringy, dandruffy hair. Plus, all the things I still hate about myself now: my wide nose, my bony hands.

I remember I did have one friend in seventh grade: Hannah.

Hannah was blonde and fair-skinned. She took me to one of my first football games. During the game, she asked every boy there who they thought was prettier: her or me. Every single boy said she was prettier, many of them saying Asian girls were ugly. I tried to laugh it off at the time, like you said, to agree with them, to insult myself first, to claim the insult as my own so that it wouldn't touch me. I said, "Yes, of course, she is prettier than me. I'm so ugly."

When her father picked us up at the end of the game, she told him what all the boys said, and he agreed with her, that she was beautiful, and then, he said something generic to me about how looks don't matter.

When I arrived home, my parents were already asleep, but I shook them awake and wept in my mother's arms. They were angry at Hannah for me. They told me I wasn't ugly, but it was hard to believe them. I rarely believed what our parents said anymore; they were of a different time and place.

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You say now that there wasn't an alternative, that we were lonely. You even said once: "What was the alternative? To be proud of our Asian heritage—in that school?"

Yes, people would've pushed us away even more. It was required that we made fun of ourselves, that we showed our friends that we were cool with it.

And look at us now. Is this our "Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage"—one of ambivalence, self-hatred, self-denial? Perhaps the alternative was that we would've been friendless, but we would've kept some part of ourselves intact.

I remember the one other Asian girl in my grade: Akiho. I wonder what she's up to now. She was tough, and I admired her for it. She never spoke. I only heard her speak once, and this was in 6th grade health class. She was asked what to do if someone offered her drugs. She said: "Just say no." I was stunned. The whole class' jaws dropped in unison. That was the only time we'd heard her voice.

Akiho had lice once before I moved there, probably in 5th grade, and when I arrived, everyone called me Akiho. People asked me if I had lice, and I had no idea why, until I found out that Akiho had had lice. It was as if they thought lice were a distinctly Asian problem, and not something children would sometimes get from one another.

You asked: "What was the alternative?" Akiho was the alternative, to be strong, angry, and friendless. I wished she were friendlier though. I would've been her friend. I remember trying to talk to her sometimes. She never replied, which made me feel even more isolated. But at least she kept something of herself. She didn't destroy herself the way we did.

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And we did end up making friends—some of them good friends, actually. How? We acted in plays. We were lucky to go to a high school that did five plays a year. It is not an exaggeration to say theatre literally saved our lives. Theatre saved a lot of lives. It was where the queer, POC, nerdy weirdos in our school found their people.

Certainly, there were never Asian roles for us, but being Asian and playing white roles made us feel like Asian people could be like white people, could blend into white families, white communities, with no problem at all. They could fit in as a French prison guard and police officer in 18th century France. They could fit in as a German whore in pre-WWII Germany. They could fit in as a reverend who hates dancing in a town where dancing and rock n’ roll is banned. They could fit in as the sister and daughter of white people in a Sam Shepherd play. None of these characters needed to explain themselves. It wasn’t acknowledged in the play that they were Asian, it wasn’t in the script. They just were. When we were accepted into plays, we didn’t have to justify why we were there. We were there because we were good enough to be there. We were there to—quite literally—fulfill a role.

And you are still an actor now. You play some roles that require an Asian actor, but you play other roles that could be filled by actors of various races. I wonder how you feel inside the body of an Asian character. Does it feel natural to be there, or do you feel how we always felt—a constant desire to be someone else?

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In November 2016, after Donald Trump was elected president, there were multiple reports of white children in DeWitt Junior High School linking arms and forming a wall to block minority students from getting to where they needed to go. A Latina student was stopped from going to her locker, and an Asian student was told that she should be deported.

The school did not explain what disciplinary actions they were taking against the students who did this.

I posted about this on social media, and someone wrote something about how the parents should be the ones held responsible. It is true that children learn these things from adults, and perhaps, the kids should not be blamed for their actions. Nevertheless, I know first-hand how feelings of outsidersness can resound throughout peoples' lives, how even after things change in a person's life, these feelings can remain.

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We never celebrated Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month in our high school. It would've been hilarious if we did, considering there were no more than five of us there. But as I write this letter, I think, it might have made a difference if our school celebrated all of the history, heritage, awareness, and pride months.

I asked Mom about her experience with Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month. She worked for the federal government, at the Military Entrance Processing Station in south Lansing, and at the end of every April, she'd get an email reminding her that it was time to celebrate it. She was the only Asian or Pacific Islander at her job, but they celebrated it anyway. She did all the work for it. She put up posters of different Asian cultures, and one day in May, they had a celebration. She'd invite Asian speakers and dancers. She made food—adobo, pancit, and lumpia—and her co-workers ate and loved it.

It was a lot of work for her to do this, but when she talked to me about it, she was laughing. She was proud of it. I asked her how it felt to share her culture in that way. She said: "It made me feel good."

I wonder what it would have done for the white kids in my school, for the white teachers and administration, if we had celebrated Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month every year. But most importantly, I wonder what it would've done for us, the Asian kids, how we might be different because of it, if they had invited our parents to make food, dance, explain who we were; if there had been a designated period of celebration, appreciation; and then, if we could've watched other people, our peers, appreciate it all, the way we saw them eating and enjoying lumpia. It certainly would not have fixed the outsidersness we felt or the racism of some of the students at our school, but if we had this, I wonder: Would you and I have been given the permission to love more about who we are, where we came from?

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And I am a writer now, some people call me a Filipina writer. I wrote a book about our family's immigration from the Philippines. I think about our middle and high school experience a lot because I am often baffled by my obsession with our family and culture, and by the disconnection I feel from it. You and I talk about it endlessly, so I know you are obsessed with it too. I sometimes still feel like an imposter writing about being Filipino, because for that period in our lives—middle school and high school—I pushed myself away from it as much as I could.

You asked me: “What was the alternative—to be proud about our Asian heritage?” Perhaps, that alternative was there, but we felt we couldn't do it by ourselves. It would've made us feel too vulnerable. I'm not sure how much it would've changed us to celebrate Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, but I think it could've helped if—just for a month or even for a day—our school, our community, had said: “We see you. Here. Go celebrate.”