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Living Biracial

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My mother's parents immigrated to the United States from South Korea before having kids and starting a family in Wisconsin. There, they raised five children: three girls and two boys. Despite being raised by Korean parents, my mother and her siblings began to assimilate to Western society very quickly. Growing up, most of the family gatherings I went to were with my dad's side of the family: small town, farmland Massachusetts. I never really noticed the awkward dynamic between my white family and my Korean mother until I was older. Now, I hear all the micro-aggressions and feel the tension during Christmas dinner whenever politics is mentioned. My grandma insists I have a "tiger mom." My cousin let the word "chink" slip at a family barbecue once. My grandpa will mimic Korean language on the TV by saying "ching chong." It can be hard knowing that even though we are related, they have watched me grow up, and I even looked up to them as a child, my extended family will never see past the fact that I am Asian, making me fundamentally different than them.

Learning to accept myself and my culture was very tough growing up with a close family and their biases. Besides a traditional first birthday ceremony known as "Doljanchi," there was barely any incorporation of Korean culture in my childhood, most of it being food. In middle school, the other Asian girls would not believe me when I told them I was half Korean. They denied it until a school play when they saw my Asian mother give me a hug. Shocked, they said, "Oh, you really *are* Asian!" This has always made me insecure about not looking "Asian enough" or being "whitewashed." Only during high school when I made friends with the other kids in orchestra did I truly feel like I could be proud of my culture without worrying about what other people would think. They would acknowledge me as Asian, acknowledge the biases and prejudices I have experienced, and really accept me for who I am.

Though I could be white passing under certain circumstances, I feel as though I am more racially ambiguous. A lot of times people will guess that I am Latina, Hispanic, Pilipino, Hawaiian, or Italian. I used to work at a café and have had people come up to me and start speaking Spanish expecting me to know the language. This was almost reassuring in a way, that total strangers acknowledge me as someone of color versus the invalidation and rejection of my cultural identity I have faced so many times in the

past. I know I should not really be flattered, so to speak, but it was a small glimpse into that sense of unity and unspoken bond that minorities share. Every time I meet another mixed person, there is an instant connection and a deeper understanding with each other. No one says it aloud, but we both know what it is like to not know who you are, to be so unsure of yourself, so much as to doubt your own genetics. That community and mutual understanding is one of the things I am proudest of to call myself a person of color.

Being only half Asian and not raised with Korean traditions, I now try my best to learn and appreciate Korean culture as much as I can. My mom never learned Hangul from her parents, so I never did either. Not being able to communicate or read my own native language started to bother me, so I have tried to learn it now. So far, I have mostly memorized the alphabet and know the phonetic sounds but have not mastered it enough to start learning anything past simple words. It may be a small step, but I feel much more connected to my culture already. Just going to Korean restaurants and being able to actually read the menu felt so validating (despite not knowing what anything means).

Christmas is the only time of the year when both my mom and dad's sides celebrate together. This created an interesting mix of two vastly distinct cultures. My white grandma is Polish, and she always makes kielbasa, pierogis, and stuffed cabbage; on my mom's side, we hand roll mandu, grill bulgogi, and steam rice. There is no Christmas ham, no yams or cranberry sauce, just traditional Polish and Korean dishes served buffet style. Though the atmosphere can be awkward or tense at times, this unique tradition has helped bring everyone together over the years.

I strongly believe my cultural identity has been a positive feature in my life. Growing up and being able to see the world through the eyes of a white majority and an Asian minority has allowed me to understand many different perspectives. Though I do not agree with my white family on their beliefs and values, I can *understand* why they believe in the things they do. Knowing that I can see the world through these different lenses allows me to set aside these debates and be present with my family. I realize now

they have never changed from when I was a kid; I have just grown up and can see past the family barbecues by the pool and really understand them.