

Asian Exclusion Act

Immigration Act of 1924, which included the National Origins Act, Asian Exclusion Act

"Some of the law's strongest supporters were influenced by Madison Grant and his 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race*. Grant was a eugenicist and an advocate of the racial hygiene theory. His data purported to show the superiority of the founding Northern European races. . . . The act barred specific origins from the Asia-Pacific Triangle which included Japan, China, the Philippines, Laos, Siam (Thailand), Cambodia, Singapore (then a British colony), Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Malaysia.[3] It barred these immigrants because they were deemed to be of an "undesirable" race.[3]..... The quotas remained in place with minor alterations until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration Act of 1924](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_Act_of_1924)

Chinese Exclusion Act was a United States federal law passed on May 6, 1882, following 1880 revisions to the Burlingame Treaty of 1868. Those revisions allowed the U.S. to suspend immigration, and Congress subsequently acted quickly to implement the suspension of Chinese immigration, a ban that lasted over 60 years.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese Exclusion Act %28United States%29s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Exclusion_Act_%28United_States%29s)

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Immigration and Nationality Act amendments of 1965heavily supported by Senator Ted Kennedy.... President Lyndon Johnson signed the legislation into law.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's

Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island, New York

October 3, 1965

. . . . This bill that we will sign today is . . . one of the most important acts of this Congress and of this administration. For it does repair a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice. It corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation. . . . this measure that we will sign today will really make us truer to ourselves both as a country and as a people. It will strengthen us in a hundred unseen ways. . . .

We are indebted, too, to the vision of the late beloved President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and to the support given to this measure by the then Attorney General and now Senator, Robert F. Kennedy. . . .

This bill says simply that from this day forth those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationship to those already here.

This is a simple test, and it is a fair test. Those who can contribute most to this country--to its growth, to its strength, to its spirit--will be the first that are admitted to this land.

The fairness of this standard is so self-evident that we may well wonder that it has not always been applied. Yet the fact is that for over four decades the immigration policy of the United States has been twisted and has been distorted by the harsh injustice of the national origins quota system. . . . This system violated the basic principle of American democracy--the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man. . . . It has been un-American in the highest sense, because it has been untrue to the faith that brought thousands to these shores even before we were a country.

Today, with my signature, this system is abolished.

We can now believe that it will never again shadow the gate to the American Nation with the twin barriers of prejudice and privilege.

Our beautiful America was built by a nation of strangers. From a hundred different places or more they have poured forth into an empty land, joining and blending in one mighty and irresistible tide.

The land flourished because it was fed from so many sources--because it was nourished by so many cultures and traditions and peoples.

And from this experience, almost unique in the history of nations, has come America's attitude toward the rest of the world. We, because of what we are, feel safer and stronger in a world as varied as the people who make it up--a world where no country rules another and all countries can deal with the basic problems of human dignity and deal with those problems in their own way.

Now, under the monument which has welcomed so many to our shores, the American Nation returns to the finest of its traditions today. . . .

When the earliest settlers poured into a wild continent there was no one to ask them where they came from. The only question was: Were they sturdy enough to make the journey, were they strong enough to clear the land, were they enduring enough to make a home for freedom, and were they brave enough to die for liberty if it became necessary to do so?

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/651003.asp>

one fear is definitely me becoming homosexual. He is very homophobic and never ceases from making offensive remarks or jokes. He always tells me, "if I ever find out that you are a *gays*, I'll knock your teeth out and kick you out of the house." I always laughed at the threat and took no offense to it because I knew it would never come to that. However, much to my dad's chagrin, I now defend homosexuals whenever he makes a bad comment. Since coming to college, I have become more open-minded and tolerant of homosexuals. Some of my friends and fraternity brothers are gay, and I really can care less about their sexual orientation. I am the most tolerant one in my family, and for that reason I probably do not hold the image of having *machismo* anymore. Men are supposed to be masculine, not sissies, and the fact that I defend homosexuals means that I am on their side, not the *machos* side.

I sometimes wonder what my grandmother would say if she were still alive. She would probably be proud of me for doing so well in life and going to a good college, even though I have lost all the Spanish she taught me. She would make a big fuss to all her friends about my success and continue to compare me favorably with her other grandchildren. To some degree I feel as though I have lived up to her image of me. Although I am not a perfect angel, as she believed me to be, I have worked hard throughout my life. Every good grade I get and anything I accomplish, I feel as if I am doing it for her and the family. And I always remind myself that my accomplishments are less important as stepping-stones for my future success than as tokens of gratitude to make the family proud. Whenever I drink, smoke, curse, sin, or do whatever else at school that would shock my family, I always feel guilty, as if my grandmother is looking down on me from above and is unhappy at what I've done and what I've become. Once again I feel the burden of not living up to her standards, which motivates me to straighten up and work harder. And though it has been over fifteen years since she passed away, she continues to be an integral part of my life. I miss her a lot. The funny thing is that even though my memories of her are few and weak, she still has this amazing power to motivate me to live at least one half of my double life in a manner to make her and the family proud.

After graduating with a BA in economics, Abiel Acosta started working as a financial advisor/investment broker for a small company in Los Angeles. After two years there, he decided to move back home to Ventura and build his practice near the rest of his family.

from Mi Voz, Mi Vida: LATINO COLLEGE STUDENTS TELL THEIR LIFE STORIES, ed. A. Garrido et al., Cornell U.P., 2007.

Miguel Ramirez The Unknown Want

When people think of Mexico they think of Aztec pyramids, the choking smog of Mexico City, or perhaps the savage heat of its copper-hued deserts. I can't see any of that from where I live, but I can see the stumps of Tijuana—shacks built of plywood and cardboard that cling to the face of a hill.

"That's Mexico," I told my friend Liz while we were picking apples in my backyard. She was visiting from Boston and was still slightly jet-lagged.

"What?" she said, turning her head to the south.

"Yeah," I said, casually. "Down by the ocean, between the spot where the neighbor's row of pine trees ends and the cemetery cross stands."

"Wow, I see it! Do you go all the time?" she asked.

She rinsed a green apple with the hose and climbed my neighbor's wooden fence to get a better view of Mexico.

"Not really," I said, joining her on the fence. "We don't have family there; my parents are from the interior of Mexico. Anyway, it's not going anywhere, so we've never had a need to go. It's always just kind of there."

"In case anything went wrong," she teased.

"Yeah," I said.

From my earliest memory of Mexico—that place over there—I knew it was where I belonged, though we didn't live there. The United States was my home, but it wasn't mine. When you cross the international border into the United States you are asked to declare your citizenship; I always thought that they only asked Mexicans. I have never felt at home in the United States, partly because of my parents. Although my mother has lived in the United States for most of her life, she has never learned English. We

speak Spanish at home, and my parents have always said my sister and I are Mexican. We refer to Caucasians as "Americans."

From my travels in Mexico as a child, I knew I liked life in the United States better than life in Mexico, but I have nevertheless always felt like a guest here. In elementary school I was in bilingual education, and I didn't know any white people personally until I met my fourth-grade teacher. For most of my childhood all I knew was that the president was white, my father's boss was white, and, from television, I knew that there was an entire place populated by only white people. I was not white and I did not have access to that world.

In elementary school I was the ESL (English as a Second Language) learner, in high school I was the college-bound Mexican, and even now I don't feel like a Dartmouth student but rather a Latino Dartmouth student. I never found a place where I fit in, where my identity wasn't qualified by my race—and later by my sexual orientation. Nevertheless, I was always well liked and accepted, and so I never questioned my feelings of detachment. It wasn't until college that I realized my efforts to succeed in school were fueled by a need, an undefined want to find a place where I could simply *be*.

My family's history begins in the United States. My father is originally from the south of Mexico, but he grew up near the Mexican-American border, crossing back and forth. His immediate family lives in San Diego, and only my grandmother keeps in touch with her family back in Mexico. My mother left the northern city of Oregon, Sonora, at twenty-two and traveled to the United States alone. Her family is still in Mexico. We keep in contact with them and we often visit, but we are not particularly close—there was a distinct break when my mother came to the United States.

On one of my trips to visit my mother's family, I learned that I wasn't Mexican. I was at a candy store with an older cousin and overheard her conversation with a store clerk.

"My aunt has been in the States for twenty years," she said, "but he [indicating me] was born there."

"Really," the clerk said, handing me a bag of candy. "He speaks Spanish very well."

"Even though he's American, they speak Spanish at home."
American?

"No," I said. "I'm Mexican."

"Honey," my cousin said, "your parents are Mexican, but you were born in the United States. Like your sister."

Later that night my father confirmed the news. "You are Mexican," he said, "but you were born in the United States. You are Mexican American."

I was only seven years old, but even at that age I knew that being Mexican American meant I wasn't really either one. I was not upset by learning this, especially since the location of our home implied I was somewhere in the middle—we were Mexicans living in the United States and we could see Mexico from our backyard. More than anything, this knowledge confirmed a sense of difference that my parents and my teachers had instilled in me.

I was always well behaved and frequently was compared favorably to others by my family and teachers. I was good while my cousins were bad. I helped at church when most of the other children were distracting and unruly. My mother likes recalling the time I impressed an old white man at a restaurant. He understood Spanish and was impressed by my behavior as I spoke with my family. He wanted to give me money, saying there were few children like me "these days." My parents thanked him but refused the money.

Some months after this encounter, my mother walked me to my first day of kindergarten, my very first day of school. I was excited because I was wearing brand-new clothes and brown dress shoes that hurt my feet, though I was too afraid to complain.

"Kindergarten," she said, as I looked down at my aching feet, "is the first rung on a ladder that leads up to college. In college you learn to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever you want to be. Your father and I weren't able to go to college, but you will. Your sister will go first and then a few years later, when you're old enough, you will go too."

Later that day, my kindergarten teacher asked the class why they were in school.

"Because my friend is here," Julio said. By the time we were in high school Julio had a child. And since our high school graduation I've heard that he's had trouble with the law.

"My mom made me come," Jessica said. She was a very pretty girl who, it turned out, watched sleazy Mexican soap operas with her mother every night. Jessica came to school every day as a different character from one of the shows.

Then my teacher asked me. I told her, "Kindergarten is the first step on a ladder to college." Her face froze, and I thought I had done something wrong. Then she smiled and said, "Very good." From that day on I was her favorite and the one the other students were told to emulate.

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As I progressed in school, I liked getting attention and praise but didn't like being singled out for the academic success I was having. I'd fidget and play with my fingers when my parents told me to talk about my last exam or the books I was reading during church picnics or family reunions. Even though I was given special attention, other students never picked on me. I learned that if I was modest about my success and helped my classmates, especially my popular classmates, I would be fine. I was surprisingly well liked. When other students were savagely teased or physically attacked, I always wish I had done something to stop it, but then I was nine years old and just wanted to fit in.

I was always the ESL student—no matter what I did, my identity was mediated by that fact that English was my second language. In fifth grade I entered a speech contest sponsored by the local Rotary club. I was very nervous in the days leading up to the competition. I didn't like to speak in public because people occasionally teased me for my accent—especially when I did well on exams. Nevertheless, I won second place.

The day after the competition I took my medal to school and showed it to my teacher during recess. After school I walked down the hall to Ms. Wheatley's room. She was my fourth-grade teacher and truly one of the best teachers I've ever had. She was essential in helping me make the move to English-language instruction, making me read out loud in front of the class on a regular basis.

"Ms. Wheatley!" I called, running into her classroom. The chairs were stacked on top of the desks and she was hanging up spelling tests in the back of the room. She turned and saw the medal and her face lit up. "What's that?"

"I won second place in a speech competition."

"Honey, that's great!" She gave me a hug as her husband walked in. "Miguel, this is my husband."

"Hello, Miguel," he said, giving me his massive hand to shake. "Miguel was my student last year and he just won second place in a speech contest," Ms. Wheatley explained. "He came in from the ESL program and you would be amazed by his progress. He was one of my top students by the end of the year."

ESL? I just smiled, gripping my medal in my hands. That acronym was stigmatized at my school. Most of the ESL students were Mexican and we teased each other about our immigration status. "I'll call the Border Patrol on your mom," the kids would yell at each other. "You're ESL," they cried.

in the playground, ESL was the equivalent to "Special Ed"—being mean-lyly retarded.

In junior high I was no longer ESL, but I still had my accent. Once, in my seventh-grade history class, I was reading out loud from a textbook. I was a good reader, consistently scoring at the top of my class. I was reading about Egypt; I remember seeing the topography of the land in my head as I read.

"The Egyptian desert," I read out loud, "is in some ways a typical desert. It has intense heat, dry winds, sparse vegetation, et cetera."

"Et cetera," I said, and everyone giggled.

"It's fine," Ms. Bell said. "Keep going." I finished reading the section and she called on someone else. Later in that class period Ms. Bell returned our last tests. "I'm not very happy with your exams," she said. She paced around the room, looking each one of us in the eye as she handed back the paper.

Andrew, the boy next to me, had failed his exam. He was as smart as the rest of us, but he never did his work. I had earned an A. I didn't show anyone my exam; I just placed it on my desk and looked down at it, smiling. The perfect white sheet was beautiful, and my score, 100/100, written so delicately in blue ink, looked painfully elegant.

When I looked up, smiling, Andrew was glaring at me.

"Ex sseterra," he said, and looked away.

It seemed that no matter how well I did in school, I would always be an ESL student; I would always be different. Two things happened in junior high that confirmed that difference. I experienced my first blatant instance of racism, and I realized I was gay.

For as long as I can remember, I have had erotic feelings toward other boys. In junior high I realized this meant I was gay. I liked watching professional wrestling and I liked wrestling with other boys. It was a game we all played, but even then I knew that the pleasure I experienced was different.

There was a boy I spent a lot of time with in third grade. I guess I had a crush on him. During recess one day, we wrestled. I was taller and much stronger, but instead of pouncing and pinning him to the ground, I grabbed his shoulders. He pressed his shoulders into my chest and we became locked, each trying to push the other back. I grabbed his waist with my left hand and I could feel him struggling to get leverage in order to knock me over. I knew he was trying to win, to end the match as fast as

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possible, but I was trying to prolong it, only countering his moves. Finally, he lost his balance and fell on his back. I sat on his stomach and pinned his arms to his chest. The fact that we were touching exhilarated me. I didn't understand the nature of my feelings, but I knew to keep quiet about them. Still, I was never ashamed of them.

My parents never warned me about homosexuals—they never talked about sex at all. However, the pastor at my Catholic church was very liberal, and he organized a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parishioners. When I was twelve, he hung a section of the AIDS quilt inside the church and spoke about the quilt, AIDS, and tolerance for homosexuality during his sermon. The only time I heard comments about homosexuality with a negative connotation was from boys at school.

My classmate Michael was a short, effeminate boy who could only play with girls because the boys would beat him up. "He's a faggot," another classmate informed me. I was in seventh grade and I knew by then that the word *faggot* meant boys like me, but it didn't bother me. I knew that there was a relationship between the words *faggot* and *gay* that was similar to the relationship between the words *spic* and *Mexican*. I knew that I was Mexican, but not a spic. By then I also knew I was gay, but not a faggot.

All my life, I had been told I was different. By seventh grade I knew that included being a homosexual. I never felt ashamed. I figured there were more of us out there and I just had to find them.

During that school year, my sister came home from her first year at college and told my parents she was Chicana.

"What's wrong with being Mexican?" my mother asked.

"Nothing," my sister said. "Chicana acknowledges my Mexican heritage, but also my American heritage. There have been Mexicans in California since before there was a California and we have a culture here that isn't completely Mexican or completely American. This culture is called Chicano."

My sister's announcement made me think, if Chicanos were just now finding an identity, then there must be more gay people out there who were also searching—I just had to find them.

When I was in eighth grade, my parents bought me a computer and a subscription to America Online. They made the wonderful mistake of putting the computer in my bedroom, and within days I knew I was not alone in my feeling toward men.

In tenth grade I came out to my parents. By then, I was absolutely sure

about my feeling toward men; it was my feelings that I had to sort out. Although I preferred men, I believed I could still be attracted to a woman. That later turned out to be false.

"I'm bisexual," I said.

My mother was visibly shocked. The image on the silenced television reflected blue off her glazed-over eyes. She asked me, "Is it that you like to wear women's clothes?"

"No," I said, "I don't like dressing like a girl."

"Well, what?" my mother asked.

"I am attracted to men." I was slouching and sitting on my hands. I could see into my room behind my mother's shoulder and I wanted to crawl into my bed.

"This is big news," my mother said. "I think you should think about this more."

"OK," I said.

"Don't tell your cousins," she pleaded.

"Fine," I said.

I returned to my room and phoned my best friend Iriz. She had recently come out as bisexual also and had urged me not to tell my parents.

"No way!" she said when I called her. "You told them! You're dumb! They didn't get pissed?"

"No," I said, surprised. I knew my parents wouldn't disown me or do anything drastic, but I had expected some kind of drama. In fact, I was a little disappointed when I didn't get it.

When my mother came in an hour later and told me she and my dad would support me in whatever I did, but they wanted me to see a psychiatrist, I was a little relieved and excited. The shrink turned out to be incompetent. During our three sessions, he made a half-hearted attempt to convince me that my homosexual feelings were a phase, and we spent the rest of the time talking about movies. Not films with gay themes or questionable characters, just movies he wanted to watch, good reviews he'd heard.

My parents and I never talked about my homosexuality again and I let them believe what they wanted. I figured I would one day enlighten them further, and until then it would be a known secret. I never considered coming out at school either, although my urban, multiethnic public high school was a truly open and inclusive place. Groups of friends were diverse and they included honor students, athletes, and kids in marching band. There

was no racial tension or division by class. I am sure that if I had come out as gay in high school I would have been accepted by the student body and supported by administrators. But I kept my sexuality a secret to all but one friend. I already didn't fit in because I was one of the few going to college and the last thing I wanted was to be the gay, college-bound Mexican—the Other. (I feared my "gayness" would isolate me more from the general population.)

My feelings of otherness were fueled by an act of racism I faced in junior high during the time I was confronting my sexuality. My sister had come home for Thanksgiving during her freshman year at UC Santa Cruz. We were at the airport waiting for the plane that would take her back, when two INS officers, dressed in civilian clothes, walked up to us and asked to see our papers.

"Our papers?" my dad asked. He looked around at the travelers surrounding us.

I was sitting next to my mother, who was looking through her bag to find her green card and our birth certificates. When crossing the border into the United States, INS officers at the border would ask our citizenship. Karina and I would say, "American citizen." Now, confronted at the airport, I kept repeating that in my head, "American citizen, American citizen."

"Yes," the first officer said, "proof that you can be here."

They were standing above us drawing suspicious glances and curious looks. They were both wearing jeans. The first officer was wearing a blazer over a golf shirt. The second officer wore a green windbreaker and didn't bother to look at us and hid behind dark aviator sunglasses.

I watched as my father, smiling and still sitting, took out his wallet and removed his green card. He took the papers my mother handed him and passed them to the first officer. I kept thinking, "American citizen, American citizen." I wanted to be ready in case they asked, to answer correctly the first time. I was too afraid to smile, and I tensed up when my sister stood to face the officers.

"Wait," Karina said. Pencil thin and barely five feet four, she looked the first officer in the eye. "Who are you? Where are your badges?"

"Excuse me?" the second officer said, suddenly annoyed.

"Your badges," my sister said again. She turned to look at him.

"How old are you?" the second officer asked.

She hesitated. "Seventeen."

Then you don't know our policies," he said. The officers exchanged glances and then flashed their badges, but too lucky for us to get a good look. Then the first officer thrust the papers my father and cleared his throat.

"Very good," he said. "Have a nice day."

They turned and walked away, quickly leaving the terminal.

"They can't do that," my sister said.

"It's all right," my father assured her, trying to quiet her down. "They're gone."

"That's not right. They can't just make us identify ourselves. We weren't doing anything wrong."

"At least they picked us," my mother said. "When they asked for our papers, I saw some people rush to the bathroom."

That was a time of anti-immigrant sentiment in California. Bands of men roamed the hills of San Diego trying to catch illegal immigrants. There were also racist groups who would impersonate INS officers and question people they thought might be illegal immigrants. My sister believes that the men at the airport were impersonators.

We sat around for another half hour, trying to return to our conversation and ignore the glances from the people around us. My sister was upset, but my parents were only embarrassed. I didn't understand why we were made to identify ourselves, why we were singled out. Even though we were dressed well and "knew how to act," our right to be in this country was tentative.

I didn't fit in at school because I was college bound and because I was gay, and I also wasn't "American." There didn't seem to be a place for me. While still in high school I looked forward to attending college, which I thought would be a place where my differences would be accepted, where being smart, or gay, or Mexican wouldn't be a big deal. I was fiercely independent in applying to schools, filling out forms, and signing my parents' names, even paying for my AP exams from money I earned at work.

I just wanted to find a place where I would finally fit in. I picked Dartmouth because it was literally the Ivy League school farthest from home in terms of miles and hours of travel. I knew most people there would be wealthy and white, but I thought my difference would be accepted nonetheless. I arrived at Dartmouth, found I wasn't "gay enough" for the gay students and that I was noticed by others for being Hispanic before I was Miguel. So much for fitting in.

During my sophomore year I began to tell more people I was gay. I never talked about it freshman year because I wasn't sure how people would react. I wanted to get a better feel for the gay community at Dartmouth before throwing myself into it. By sophomore summer, all of my friends knew and I was attending Dartmouth Rainbow Alliance meetings, but I wasn't completely comfortable with my homosexuality, partly because of the other guys who were coming out.

I tried to find a community of like-minded men, but I found only a network for random hook-ups. Because I didn't like to hook up, most of the gay men assumed I wasn't out. I didn't get much help from my gay friends. Most of the gay men I've met have had some kind of eating disorder or complex due to the way they viewed their body. They showed it with gossip and backhanded comments directed at friends. I'm a senior now, and I have been in a monogamous relationship with one of the few emotionally stable gay men on campus for a year. Yet, the same people still ask me if I'm out. I haven't fared better with the larger Dartmouth community, where, after asking my name, people ask my race.

"So where are you from?" Peter asked. White and wealthy, he is a typical Dartmouth student.

"San Diego," I said.

"No," he said, smiling at my confusion. "Where are you from?" And after a short pause, "Where are your parents from?"

"What does it matter?" I often want to ask.

"Well, I'm from San Diego," I said. "My parents are from Mexico."

"Oh, so you're Mexican," he said, smiling.

I often get that response, and I always want to respond, "If that were the case I would have said so."

Minority students wait until they know me better before they ask my race. But it's usually the second question white students ask, and I don't understand why. Is it information they need in order to know how to talk to me or how to treat me? Would they ask someone, "Are you gay?" or "What does your father do and how much money does he make?" Not only do they ask, they have the audacity to then label me: "Oh, so you're Mexican."

I have always had to deal with outsider status and I have accepted the benefits that come from it, although I've always felt tension around it too. It has allowed me to deal with my homosexuality without feelings of solitude or shame, and I have never felt pressure to conform. Many Latinos on campus feel they are not Latino enough, so they take steps to enhance

our Latinness. Unfortunately, they often confuse the ghetto with authenticity. I have never fit in with anyone, yet I've never felt my identity is uncertain.

Still I love to say I am not Mexican in the usual ways. I dress like an American, I walk like an American, I see the world like an American, and when I visit Mexico I do not fool anyone—before I say a word, people know that I am American. Even my Spanish isn't Mexican. I speak Spanish at home, but my formal education was in Castilian Spanish. I don't know Mexican idioms or slang. I am, in fact, American, but in America, my home, I feel like an expatriate. My place in this country is often questioned, and my access to the culture and language has always been tentative.

I have always tried to make my race superfluous—to make it just another fact, like the color of my eyes or my preference in music. All of my early efforts in school were to show my teachers that I wasn't just another ESL student, and later to show my peers that I wasn't just the "Mexican student." I believe I failed to do that.

I will be living at home after graduation from Dartmouth out of a sense of obligation and not because I want to. I'll have to talk to my parents about my homosexuality, and have to deal with bringing gay friends home and introducing my parents to my boyfriend, who is moving to San Diego. I am confident that they will eventually accept me, but they will need time. Until then, I'll have to be careful with my actions and my behavior.

My homosexuality only compounds the problems I face as the child of immigrants. My parents sacrificed their happiness for my sister and me; they made our dreams their dreams. My father has never complained, but I know he hates his tedious job as a ship welder. When I enrolled at Dartmouth he took out loans. My mother told me that once his financial obligations have been paid in full, he will retire. We hope that it will be in five years.

I also know that my mother would like to be closer to her family in Mexico, but she stays in the United States because of my sister and me. She came to the United States alone when she was a young woman, and although she was here legally, immigrants like her were victims of harassment and abuse. On the news we once saw a group of white teenage boys who were on trial for savagely beating several elderly Mexican migrant workers. "It never gets better," my mother said. "I had my papers and I followed the law, but that doesn't mean anything to some of those people." I sensed the violence and resentment in her words, and I'm sure she often wanted to go back to Mexico. But, as she once told me, "I'd never seen your face, but I stayed here for you."

parents worked so hard for. The terms of my success haven't been easy; I will always be an outsider and I can't ever go back home. I accept these truths, but sometimes, when my parents ask me about school and they smile politely as I recount my triumphs and express my concerns, I wonder if the terms have been too high.

At Dartmouth Miguel Ramirez majored in creative writing, and he continues to improve his prose in San Diego. He currently works with students with physical and developmental disabilities. He wants to be a filmmaker and plans to move to New York City to take classes in film production, work in the industry, and eventually enroll in film school.

I love my parents dearly and often feel the need to bow my head in tribute to them, but there is now a break between us. They support me and they love me, but they don't understand what I did here at Dartmouth and they will not understand my life—not even that I am entering a higher education class.

I also feel a paralyzing sense of obligation. When I could have earned an A but settled on an A-minus, it felt like I slapped my parents in the face. No matter how successful I am, it will never make up for the fact that my parents put themselves, their personal dreams and goals aside so I could succeed. I don't know how to make up for what they've done for me.

Even though I plan to live at home, I will only be visiting; I can't reconcile the schism with my parents, and I feel a similar distance from my community in San Diego. I went to college, to Dartmouth no less, and some of my neighbors think I am "uppity." Some of my high school friends don't understand why I "wasted" my time with college—they are driving brand-new cars and wearing fancy sneakers, while I still have my clothes from high school. They just don't see the long-term effects of our different decisions. Like most first-generation college students, I face the issue of class. I moved up, and I can't go back. I love my home community, but I know that I'll only be an expatriate there, too.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the headache it has caused me, being an outsider has motivated me to succeed. I spent twenty-one years doing my best in school in order to fit in. Without that incentive, I don't know what would have happened to me. I am thankful I came to Dartmouth, because here I learned the brutal truth that I will never find a place where I will feel at home. I expect the same in the professional world—I'm sure I'll be accepted, but I don't think I will fit in.

I can't say I feel at home at Dartmouth, because my values are too different and the college campus isn't religious. Some of my peers find it odd that I plan to return home in order to make my parents happy. They tell me to strike out on my own, to be my own person. At Dartmouth individuality is privileged, but even so I have never really felt lonely. I have wonderful memories of my four years here and I met my closest friends here. I felt the same way in high school—I had my very close friends, and then there was everybody else.

When it comes down to it, I really can't complain. I have opportunities that my parents never had and more options than most of my high school classmates put together. The dilemma I face is choosing what I'm going to do with my charmed life. That's a wonderful dilemma, and it's what my

opportunity to be the woman she wants to be? I fear I won't know the answers to these questions anytime soon.

After graduating from Dartmouth College as an art history major, Antonio Rodríguez went on to become a consultant at a large professional services firm in New York City. This summer, he and his family will be moving into their first home.

Norma Andrade On Being Canela

I remember very clearly the day my brother went off to college, simply because that was the last day I ever saw him as Michael—the next time I saw him he would be Miguel. He was the first person in *mi familia*, immediate or extended, to attend college, and no one could imagine what kind of journey he was embarking on.

When my brother walked into our apartment six months into his freshman year, the first words he uttered were, “¿Dónde están mis papitos? ¿Dónde está mi hermana, la fea?” (Where are my parents? Where is my ugly sister?) My parents and I were both excited and confused: We were so happy that he was home, but we hadn't expected him to speak to us in Spanish, or to hug us like he had never hugged us before. He didn't speak much about his college experience; all I could tell was that he was going through drastic changes. This was clear in his face and his new behavior and in our verbal exchanges, which were both weird and refreshing. I observed an air about him that had never been there before—a kind of uncertainty that I couldn't quite place. These changes bothered me tremendously because I couldn't comprehend where he was coming from.

Ever since we were little, my brother and I had spoken to each other only in English, not in Spanish. We grew up speaking to our parents in Spanish, but my brother, Michael, eventually felt more comfortable speaking with them in English. After he went to college, however, he started to speak to us only in Spanish. Even more interesting was that he reverted to using words in Quechua, the Incan language that my parents grew up hearing from their parents. For example, for “parents,” instead of using the Spanish *padres*, he used the Quechua *taitas*. It was as if his college experience

allowed the cultural and ethnic traits that had been absent during his early life to be born. He embraced the indigenous richness of our family heritage, which we had never really celebrated. Something apparently led him to look inside himself and dig out his *raíces*—his roots. When I look in my brother's eyes today, I see weariness and pain. It seems to me that his quest for his past, for his identity, should not have been that hard. However, I also see a beautiful peace reflected in his eyes, and it is clear that the person he is today embraces all aspects of himself and tries to give them life.

After going to college myself, I was able to understand where my brother's weariness came from. In college, I had no choice but to place myself within the context of American history and identify myself as Latina. I never felt I had to prove anything to anyone. Maybe my appearance (dark skin, wavy black hair, and indigenous features) protected me from intra-ethnic pressures—though not, of course, from white pressures. Nevertheless, I was never scared to show who I really was. My brother, and my own college experience, taught me to take pride in and honor the changes my family went through when they made the leap to *los Estados Unidos*. I link everything that I have experienced back to *mi familia*.

La historia de mi familia—my family's history—is in many ways a classic immigrant experience, characterized by a patchwork quilt of custom and assimilation, of resistance and complicity, and of understanding and confusion. I saw much more clearly how I fit in to American society after reading a book on immigrant European women at college. I wouldn't have guessed that the experiences of Jewish and Italian immigrant women a century ago would be so closely related to my family's and my own experience, but in an American society where I am supposed to identify first and foremost with *mi gente*—Latinos—I found myself readily relating to these poor white women from 1890. I knew then that I would forever consciously identify myself as a child of immigrant parents, and my life began to change in promising, yet sad, ways. I embarked on a quest to hold on firmly to memories of the past in order to reconcile my past with my present.

My first recollections of *mi familia*, and of myself, were *las fiestas*, big family parties. When I was a *zacaosa*—a term of endearment in my family that literally means "snot-nosed kid"—*mi familia* encompassed everybody who was in any way related to us, including long-lost aunts, close family friends, *tios*—our many uncles, sixth cousins, and whoever else shared our family history in some way. Numbering around two hundred—or so it seemed—we would gather for family birthdays, weddings, showers, and on

any other occasion that gave us reason to celebrate *familias* style. These events, which occurred nearly every other week, brought us laughter, tears, sweat, criticism, and happiness all under one roof and sky.

I especially remember the parties to celebrate *cumpleaños* (birthdays). *Hey, pero* those were something to see. It was like being in a child's fantasy world: colorful *piñatas* hung from trees and *cumbias* music with a splash of salsa pumped in the background. Our birthday parties took place in Flushing Meadow Park, a beautiful spot for us *ecuatorianos* (Ecuadorians) to spend time with *la familia*. We all brought food—pots of rice, big bowls of potato salad, lots of fresh corn to be roasted, containers filled with chopped tomatoes and onions, pounds of *azotea* (seasoned) chicken and beef to become—even roasted pig, enough to feed an entire village.

We children had the time of our lives just chasing each other around. The spacious park gave us a sense of liberation, and the birthday parties allowed us to release the tension from our little lives. Although I wasn't aware of it then, most of us lived in tiny apartments, and only the park could provide enough room for our whole family. Dancing gave the grown-ups a chance to escape the monotony of their jobs, and the parties enabled them to meet up with others of their own kind who also felt the burden of the working life. Meanwhile, we children got dirty and smelly while playing on the ground, or dancing with the grown-ups, or moving our hips, arms, and legs to Lisandro Mesa's "El Siere."

At these family *fiestas* I was able to express who I was. As a young child with the family *atravida* (daredevil), I would play with the boys, hang out with the grown-ups, make jokes with everyone, and dance like a crazy little child. My mother would yell at me, saying I should stop running around so much or else I'd become a boy. But the more she yelled at me, the more I ran, and the more I ran, the more freely I entered into the world of child's play, where the sky is your only limit.

I also remember parties held at relatives' homes. I loved them just as much because of their opposite nature. While the park provided open space for all of us, a small hole of an apartment provided comfort and intimacy. The minute you stepped into the apartment you smelled the aroma of the food. The little kids would drool with hunger, expecting to be fed like queens and kings. We first went through the formalities, saying hello to everyone in the room. First we had to kiss the cheeks of first cousins, aunts, uncles, great-aunts, close cousins, distant cousins, and even cousins who weren't really cousins but were called cousins; then my brother and I would run to the table and dig into the bags of *papas fritas* (potato chips),

We would then splurge on the main course, finding a nest on the couch where we would be stuck like sardines between some smiling great-aunt and favorite cousin.

The room was filled with the chatter of *chisme*—the gossip that was spread from one person to another. *Las mujeres* would talk about what someone had the nerve to wear to the party or share the latest news of family back in Ecuador. They would entertain themselves by commenting on how others' daughters were developing nicely or not, or even by complimenting one another: "Estás linda hoy. No estás tan gordita." (You look pretty today. You're not so fat). *Las hombres*, on the other hand, would talk about politics in Ecuador or current conditions in the workforce, whether work was picking up or not. Even if it was a child's birthday party, it always ended up being a party for the adults. Still, the smaller kids also had fun. The older women would arrange a game of Fit the Tail on the Donkey or play Spanish children's music so we could bop around. I would take part in these festivities at first, but when I got bored playing with *los niños*, I sought the company of the older kids.

When I was ten, my older cousins Catalina, Denise, and Isabella were my idols. They didn't really mind my being around, although I knew I bothered them at times. They would talk about boys or the latest fashions in music and clothing. They set themselves apart from the rest of the family by chatting in English while the rest carried on in Spanish. We had the idea that speaking in English would separate us from the older generation, and we children took much pride in speaking English. We all had Spanish accents, but we took no notice of that.

The older cousins would let me in on their secrets once in a while, which I loved because it made me feel I "fit in" with the cool crowd. I was fortunate that *mi familia* provided me with female role models. I knew that some day I wanted to be like my cousins. However, I knew that somehow I couldn't fit in completely because of my skin color. My older cousins were all pretty. Denise and Isabella, who were sisters, had long black hair, fair skin, and small facial features; some people would mistake them for Spaniards, Italians, or Argentines. Catalina was the prettiest. She had green eyes, pale skin, freckles, light brown hair, and a long face with small features. I thought she was beautiful, mainly because I loved her as a person, but family members also often told me she was. I would hear Catalina this, Catalina that from old *soberas* aunts (spinsters). Although I love my aunts dearly, I never felt pretty enough for them, which I blamed on my color: *canela*—cinnamon—as my family would call me. Although I loved

est cinnamon sugar, as a child to be cinnamon seemed silly. My family believed in the notion of *adelantur la raza* (improving the race) simply by looking white. I was always referred to as *la morenita* (brown-skinned girl) or *la prieta* (the blackish one) in a family where most are light skinned. As I did I took little notice of these things—at least consciously.

Once we were older, we would make trips to the sea at Orchard Beach, Far Rockaway, or Sunken Meadow to get some sun. My cousins would apply baby oil and bake their skin like *cachifritos* (fried pork skin) under the sun for hours. I, on the other hand, turned to roasted *cañela* within minutes. Although my cousins wanted to get darker, I know that they didn't want to be as dark as I was. In winter, their complexions returned to normal, while my skin darkened all the more as the years passed. Nevertheless, those girls were my *primas* (cousins), and I loved them.

At our indoor family gatherings, after chillin' for a while, the atmosphere would be lively and hot, from both human heat and the kitchen oven. After hours of chatter, the food was ready—always at odd times of night, perhaps around ten o'clock. Everyone filled their paper plates with *arroz con frijoles*, *mote con tostado* (hominy with fried kernels of corn)—an Andean dish that *serranos*, or Ecuadorians from the mountains, love to feast on, *roast pierres*, and beans of all sorts. Our staple foods were rice and beans, along with some type of meat. I joke about this now because among my friends such food is known as poor people's food. After the food was tucked inside everyone's *harrigas*, our stomachs bulging out of our dresses, skirts, and pants, we sat in silence for a while.

Then, suddenly, some crazy vivacious relative, like my *tia* Rosario or my *prima* Amparo, would wake the crowd by grabbing some man to dance. The music would fill the room and spill into the hallways, the entire building booming with its sound. When one couple got up, the entire herd rose to dance, joking that they had to lose a few *calorias* after eating so much. Everyone danced: the kids who were falling asleep, *los viejitos*, the old folks, and the rest who came together to dance and celebrate our rich lives and culture. No space, however small, could confine the life and energy of *mi familia*. I became energetic myself. Seeing all the life that surged forth from my relatives' bodies and minds fostered an ambience of joy and love that allowed me as a small girl to be a small girl. *Mi familia* provided comfort and familiarity.

More than anyone else, *mi marmita* has been the backbone of my life. In my mother's childhood, my *abuelita* (grandmother) geared her toward cooking and cleaning houses. In fact, she was forced to drop out of school

because her family was too poor to afford books and clothing, and so she could attend to the duties of the home. My mother would tell me stories about walking to a stream a mile away to wash her family's clothing on the rocks. She could not protest, because at that time women simply did not leave home. The woman's place was the home, and that was what they were brought up to believe, with village life reinforcing such ideas. Of course my mother dreamed and felt and yearned, but, as she told me, "when there are no possibilities for a woman to leave unless you marry, then you just have to endure life." Over time, she mastered all the techniques of keeping a house immaculate—scrubbing floors, windows, and ceilings. She also cooked meals for her family morning, noon, and night. It's interesting that my *abuelita* denied my mother freedom but allowed her to attain the powerful family position of bread maker and bread giver, if not of breadwinner. When my parents married and emigrated to the United States, they brought these traditions and beliefs with them and tried to instill them in us.

Ever since my mother arrived in the United States she has had to work. Because of her upbringing, she excelled exclusively in domestic skills. Since she neither spoke English well nor was accustomed to the traditions and mentality of U.S. society, she sought help from family members who were already living in this country. There were about thirty of them, through whom my mother found jobs cleaning "gringos" apartments in New York City. My mother worked Monday through Friday, cleaning a different apartment every day. I came to know her employers, some of whom she worked for almost fifteen years, either by their last names or by some fact associated with them. There were the Greenbergs, *la rubia* (the blonde), *los de Roosevelt Island*, and *los de la cuarenta y nueve* (those from 49th Street), among others.

My mother would often take me to work with her, but never my brother. I was very young, and I really only recall when I was older and helped her at work, but my mother and her employers later told me about my first visits. My mother would wake up every morning to feed us, and then she would sleep for an hour or so. She set out around eleven o'clock, saying that she needed to attend to her own apartment in the morning. When I went to work with her, I never left her sight. I was shy—very different from how I was with *mi familia*—and intimidated by the people she worked for and often hid from them under her skirt. When she vacuumed, I would sit on top of the vacuum in order to be close to her.

Back home, my father would arrive around six o'clock after a long day

in the picture frame factory, covered in white dust from the machinery. In the summers he arrived home dehydrated, since there was no air-conditioning in the factory. My mother wouldn't come home until seven o'clock, which was one reason why I spent so much time at *las Benavides*—a family with eight children. Mrs. Benavides was a skinny little woman who already had wrinkles from all the hardships she had endured. Behind every wrinkle on my mother's face there is a story waiting to reveal the joys and the hardships of my own family's story. My mother's wrinkles are mostly around her eyes, like two windows into our world.

My mother would come home, hang her clothing in the closet, change her clothes, and then walk around to make sure everyone was home: Papi (Daddy), Miguel, and me. Then she would begin her amazing cooking. Even after long days of hard work, she cooked for her family every single night. She still tells me that her heart does not feel right unless she knows that her children have been fed. She raised my brother and me to eat everything offered us; doing otherwise is an insult, especially among poor families. My mother knows that while she cannot offer material goods or gifts to her children or guess, she can always offer pieces of her love through her cooking. After dinner, she would tidy up around our own house, doing the laundry, washing the dishes whenever we had homework, or preparing desserts like *arroz con leche y cañela* (rice pudding with cinnamon). As a little *niñita*, I took my mother's expressions of love for granted. Perhaps most important, I also took for granted what she did at work, partly because I had yet to internalize what she did.

I must have been around twelve when I started to work with my mother during the summer, while other kids were traveling or just running around. Initially, my mother asked me if I could help out. I was reluctant because I was a kid and didn't want to work, and also because around that time I was rebelling against anything and everything, especially my parents. But somehow, even then, I knew that helping out was something that I had to do for my mother.

The first apartment I remember cleaning was on Monday at the Greenbergs. The Greenbergs lived in Riverdale, in the northwest Bronx, which by car was only five minutes away from where we lived, though on the other side of the subway tracks. Tree-lined streets meandered through their neighborhood. Entering the Greenbergs' building, I would see a doorman, a highly secured entrance area, and flowers and plants everywhere. At that age, a peak time for my mind to question everything in sight, I couldn't believe the prettiness of these people's lives. I always knew that

other people lived nicer than we did—I did watch TV quite a bit—but never thought much of it. I lived in a happy little world of family and friends where concerns revolved around trying to fit in to a lively environment. That summer, when my mother first asked me to help at work, I saw our lives—my family's and mine—as poor; and I tried to understand why we were poor. I don't remember the first time I began to judge my mother's job, but at some point I did, and in retrospect I hate myself for having done so. I looked down on my mother's job for many years and was ashamed to tell people what my parents did for work.

My mother trained me to clean someone else's house. She had her own "plan of attack" for each apartment. She would first change out of her regular clothing and put on raggedy garments. She began with the bedrooms, vacuuming the floors. She didn't miss a spot. Next, she dusted everything that could possibly be dusted, including picture frames and strange objects like exotic wooden birds that looked very ugly to me. She always used really strong chemicals that forced her to wear gloves to protect her hands. She made the beds and put everything up into a pristine state.

She then moved into the "book room," as I referred to it, which seemed endless, as we attended to almost every single book and the shelves as well. In the bathroom, we both got down on our knees and scrubbed. I did not want to help with this but in the end I suffered through it with her. My mother had such a delicate manner that I could never picture her performing such grueling tasks. She eventually scrubbed the kitchen, including the oven and stove, and sometimes even the walls. She ended her day by doing laundry and ironing all the shirts. It took about nine hours to finish everything, and by the end of the day my mother was famished, I realized that she stayed so thin because she was constantly moving, with little rest.

My mother was paid in cash, "off the books." Although this is illegal and could entail dire consequences, no one who mattered ever knew. Anyway, I considered it more illegal that my mother was paid such miserly amounts of money. It was unjust for her to have to go down on her hands and knees to clean someone else's toilet and then get paid close to nothing—not enough to get by on her own. It made me angry and resentful at society. But I channeled that anger toward helping my mother with her job. After spending the entire summer cleaning houses, some two stories, others three, I began to understand what it meant for my mother to have to do this every day of her life. She worked so hard both at home and at work,

but she was never commended for what she did. I had taken what she was doing for granted, and I began to see how others did as well.

Still, I would never tell anyone what she did. When someone asked, I would say that my mother was a housewife, denying that she worked at all. My mother would even deny it herself to teachers from my high school. She knew that I was ashamed of it when we were both in public. I would ask her to get dressed up a little to go to work, so people wouldn't think that she cleaned houses, and so we could hang out in the city after a long day of cleaning. Society taught me to respect the jobs of lawyer, doctor, and professor and to look down on the kind of work my mother does. I came to ignore those jobs that were never seen or commended as respectable.

In the end, through my mother I gained an enormous amount of respect for all of the women in my family. The pride they have in their jobs inspires me to become a better person and understand our position in this society. I remember reading a book on El Salvadoran women who came to the United States and filled a specific labor sector in Washington, D.C.: that of domestic work. It fascinated me because it was the first time I had seen a documented account of the house cleaners and maids who have been stereotypically portrayed on TV for so many years. Most of the women immigrants in my family have formed a similar sacred kin network of labor, looking out for, encouraging, and supporting one another. They all clean and have even made an art out of it, and it's amazing how they have used their jobs to make themselves partly American. Today I look at these women and see strength, perseverance, and love.

Juanita, my godmother and also my third cousin on my mother's side, was the first woman in my family to gain a foothold in domestic labor. She is now about sixty years old and in my opinion is one of the strongest women ever to have existed on this planet, in addition to my mother. She just like Christina, Patricia, Elisa, Sandra, Carmensita—who passed away two years ago due to breast cancer—Marinica, Rosita, Soraya, and many others, Juanita is a *mujer* with a lot of life, energy, and creativity. She suffered badly in her low-paid work so that she could pay the bills and give her daughter opportunities. She additionally used her work as a means of acquiring the American traditions and customs found in the households she cleaned. She first learned English at work and has since mastered it enough to practice her rights in court, such as when serving in jury duty.

When Esthercita, a close family friend, first arrived in the United States, having been pretty well off in Ecuador, she landed a job in a travel agency for the airline Ecuatoriana. As the years progressed she ascended the ranks. She eventually decided to return to school to attain more managerial skills; after successfully completing certain courses, she got a job as director and manager of a travel agency in Queens, tripling her salary. At this job, however, she experienced extreme discrimination and disrespect from her employees—all were Italian. It made her life unbearable, leading her to quit, as she could not believe that she could be treated as so low. After twenty years of studying and trying to succeed, she ended up cleaning houses. When she recounted her story to me, she was very disappointed and upset, but she did say that she was happier cleaning houses, where she received respect, than she had been working with the employees who drove her away from her aspirations.

Juanita, meanwhile, has formed bonds with her employers that have helped her in many ways. One employer, who had retained her services for fifteen years, helped her make a down payment on her new house. Another, a very wealthy woman who owned thirty acres of land in the Berkshires, allowed Juanita to vacation there whenever she needed to. This provided her whole family with the opportunity to escape the noisy life of the city and enter a peaceful place; it was a safe haven for many of the members of *mi familia* who have longed to return to Ecuador to experience the liberty of roaming around in a natural habitat untouched by machines. The women could relax and do nothing but tend to the plants, go cherry or apple picking, or buy corn for roasting. No one would have experienced this place if not for the intimate connection formed between Juanita and her employer.

My mother adopted many customs learned from cleaning for other people. She would see the kinds of things they bought, especially food; she wouldn't snoop around the fridge, but when her employers offered her things to eat she took particular notice of a newly discovered dish that would wind up in our refrigerators some weeks later. She trusted these people, since they supposedly knew a lot of things—since they were *americanos* and had money. She trusted their judgment on furniture and at times even bought things that she first saw at work. Once she persuaded my father to buy chairs that she knew to be very reliable and of very good quality. Today, we still sit on these chairs, which are now raggedy from years of family gatherings. Sometimes she would go to poetry readings and art performances because she had been invited by her employers. In general, I saw

my mother becoming American in small ways through her work. As I think about it now, my mother is just as much a hybrid as I am. She has devoted, unwillingly at times because of her longing to return to Ecuador, more than thirty years of her life to this land. The difference between us is that she formed *raíces* a long time ago. It came with her territory unquestioned. I, on the other hand, am learning what it means to have *raíces*. My mother will always be Ecuadorian, but living here for many years and having close relationships with her employers has acculturated her to American traditions. She learned English very quickly and eventually excelled in it. It became her passageway onto the U.S. landscape, a place where she has learned to believe in herself as more than a housewife and domestic worker.

More than anything else, the discrepancies between my mother's Americanization and empowerment and my own have led me to feel like a marginalized person within my own family. With my parent's decision to enter the United States and raise both my brother and me here, it became inevitable that we would be very different from them. I was destined to live in two worlds—the world my parents were brought up in and which they brought to the United States with them, and the rest of society, where I gained a sense of "Americanness." At college, I do not readily claim to be American, but when I juxtapose myself with my family, I do see myself as American. I am still undergoing a process of assimilation. For me, it has been selective assimilation, because I choose what I want to embrace from American culture as well as that which I completely reject.

The factor that has contributed most to my marginalization has been the English language. When I was an infant, my *cuidadora* (babysitter) was an old Colombian woman who only spoke Spanish, so prior to entering kindergarten I only spoke Spanish. Nevertheless, as children my brother and I were able to pick up English very quickly, without which we would have been isolated from the culture that existed outside of our home. We began living double lives, speaking Spanish in the home and English in school. This duality created a gap between the two cultures; Spanish is very personal to me, while English is public and open. Even as I write this account, I wish it were in Spanish so my parents could understand it fully. . . . so we can share our memories over dinner and take pride in them, laugh at the joyful memories and ponder over our distance as children of immigrant parents.

Another part of the immigrant experience contributing to the marginalization of children from their parents is the reversal of leadership roles. We children became teachers to our parents. We would read and translate

their English mail, write letters for them on the typewriter, and teach them about American culture. My brother and I taught my parents about the procedures involved in applying to schools, and I guided them through the process of school selection as well as my school experiences, as opposed to them giving me advice.

I further see myself living in two worlds when I identify myself as Latina. This identification alone shows how different the world I live in is from *mi familia's*, as well as how close I can come to being American in *mi familia's* eyes. It is only in the United States where being "Latina" is necessary, because of the way the United States has presented its history through a "white" lens. In fact, I have come to reinterpret all of U.S. history integrally, without indiscriminately employing cultural or racial indicators. My own identification with being Latina is a form of resistance. I had been trained to look at people's color my entire life. I would go to school and hear people say, "Look at the black girl," or, "Check that white girl out." I would turn on the TV and hear black people, this, white people that. On the streets, my friends would utter, "Don't go talking to that *blanquita*—she's too *white* for us." I heard these statements—and eventually uttered them myself—day in and day out.

Of course, although identifying myself as Latina could only have been necessary after my family came to the United States, the issue of race is not present in this country alone. The "colorism" that exists and is discussed in the United States is present but just never spoken about in Latin America. In *mi familia*, certain relatives with racist mentalities would perform cruel deeds in order to make me look "white," since I was *pretita*. I remember being bathed in milk so that my skin would lighten up. One aunt disowned her only son for marrying a black woman; I heard comments that were so derogatory toward indigenous and black people that I did not know what to do; I just let them slide. The feelings of guilt and hatred that I developed toward myself for being too dark for my family should never have been present; but they were. While my family has big problems when it comes to skin color, luckily I was able to learn from their mistakes.

Another experience that led me to pay particular attention to skin color and inequalities took place in my junior year of high school. For three months, as we watched on our classroom news channel from what seemed the longest distance, Rwanda experienced a genocide. Few elaborate discussions took place and no specific details were reported. But each day, after seeing a clip or just imagining one, I cried. I cried for our complacency as human beings and for my own inability to do anything. The world I was

living in was not one I wanted to be a part of. Once the TV was shut off, girls continued gossiping about other girls and their sexual escapades with boys, and teachers followed the agenda of the day. I knew then that schools were machines and that we were both its components and its products. When I tried to bring up the topics of war and injustice—the ones that exist thousands of miles away as well as the ones that exist outside our front doors—it was futile. I needed to find explanations for what was occurring in the world. I needed to know why close to a million people had been slaughtered in such a short period of time. I needed to know why the United States and the rest of the world did nothing. I would never accept the African syndrome response: "It's the way Africans are." I knew my family couldn't help answer the questions, nor could my schools, so I sought refuge in my own learning, in gaining awareness—in the kind of education *not* found in schools.

Later, identifying myself as Latina gave me the ability to take pride in who I am as a woman of color. I no longer feel ugly or destroyed every time my aunts call me "india fea" (ugly Indian) or saying "Even though you are black, you are still beautiful." With respect to the need for and development of "Latinness," white American society first collectivized itself as being apart from others. Therefore, those "others" had to make sense of their place in society as groups of people. Although this country is very individualistic, the group is much more powerful than the individual, and when people act collectively it makes an impact—such as with the civil rights movement. In the conventional telling of U.S. history, many of these "others" are excluded and ignored; even worse, many are given histories based on lies. Buffalo Bill's telling the story of the Wild West and "them Indians" is atrocious, but sadly enough many people have believed such misrepresentations. American history had been manipulated to hide the rich legacies of brown-, yellow-, red-, and black-skinned people. Even the histories of those white-skinned people who had to lose parts of their culture and identity in order to "become American" are rarely recounted in the classroom. Therefore, efforts by immigrant Filipinos, African Americans, Japanese, Koreans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Chinese, and many others to affirm their status in the United States became necessary. People of diverse backgrounds now write stories incorporating themselves into U.S. history, unraveling the oppression that has long remained hidden. Uniting as a group—such as with *mi familia*, in the greatest sense—allows people to appear as a strong force against the white American society that always tried to oppress them. Of course, this, too, is problematic, be-

cause these groups also become monolithic. Being "Latina/o" dilutes the inherent differences among all of those who claim to be part of this group.

My own identification as Latina is more of a social and political statement. This, in essence, I associate with power. I have never heard people from my old neighborhood talk about themselves as Latinas. On the other hand, in college, a place of elitism, I feel I had no choice but to place myself and my family's experience within the context of U.S. history and identify as Latina. Since being Latina only exists within the greater context of American society, my identifying as such makes me more "American." In fact, when I call myself Latina, I am reminded of the status that I am entering into—that of privilege. There is no kind of look or trait or anything that can depict what being Latino or Latina is, but I do believe that there is a "certain something" that makes me Latina. I make up the essence of and believe in that state. It is a personal reflection and reaction to the circumstances surrounding me.

After twenty-one years of living, I have learned a lot about myself and continue to do so every day. Becoming Latina is one facet of myself that I am still learning about, because I know that it has built barriers between me and the world that I grew up in. Unintentionally, identifying as Latina disconnects me from most of my family, as they can never experience such a revolutionary identification. It is the process through which I was able to finally understand why Michael became Miguel. My large *familia* provided the foundation of my livelihood and existence, and I cry knowing there is some distance between us. It has been difficult for my parents to try to understand who I am today and why it is that I have chosen to resist the status quo found in heterosexual relationships, linear career paths, and religious devotion.

My mother especially has had the biggest problems with me, as she judges me according to her paradigm of what women should be and ought to do. Catholicism has pervaded *mi mamá's* life since her birth. Her church was like school: an indoctrinating system. She cleaned the floors, polished the pews, and joined the rosary meetings, all under *Abuelita's* stern and watchful eyes. She learned the Catholic codes: to be obedient and have blind faith—to never question or doubt, just be. She learned that good is whatever is not bad, and bad is whatever is not good. In such a polarized perspective, fulfilling female obligations had to be good, no matter how confined she felt, because it surely was not bad per se. Thus, her Catholic fervor runs deep in her bones, and she judges me for not believing. She feverishly asks God to guide me in life, protect me, and forgive me for my nonbelief. She blames my nonbelief partly on my education, partly on my

free will as an American-raised woman, and partly simply on me. Regardless, I don't judge her, because I know that the years she has spent believing can never be erased.

Although I have come to know her well, my mother still often cries and cries for reasons that I have yet to fully understand. Her tears especially pain me because I have made efforts to help other women who have been oppressed by society's imposed beliefs, but I cannot help the person whom I love most dearly. Many people are able to share everything with their parents and savor crucial developmental moments, but many cannot do that. I know that my mother is very proud of me, but she does not understand the true importance of my college experience learning about *mis raíces*. Still, when she tells others where her children are, she sees their facial expressions and is satisfied. Being marginalized in society is a beneficial experience, but being marginalized within my family has made me lose a part of who I am. My identification as Latina has been a part of my assimilation process, just as language and school have.

The immigrant experience involves not only resistance and assimilation but also complicity as a way of survival. My family was forced to accommodate to the work that was presented to them. Although they picked up mental and manual work—"bottom of the scale" jobs—they have taken great pride in their work. My mother is no longer ashamed of cleaning homes because it is an honest living. I, on the other hand, was embarrassed by my parents' work; as such, I gave in to society's views of which jobs are and are not respectable. Being embarrassed for so many years about what my mother did only impeded my growth. Now, I see the beauty in her work. This is a living that the women in *mi familia* have shared and will continue to share. They made the best out of their experiences, and I admire them for it.

The extent to which my mother has taken advantage of her own situation was evident when she went through menopause, which terrified her; she had no idea what she was going through and suffered from many symptoms. Thankfully, her employers helped her out. Through them, she obtained and read books on menopause, in English. They advised her to be a lot more demanding when going to the doctor. And this empowerment is evident elsewhere in her life as well. She readily expresses her discomfort in discussion with my father and goes to the theater on her own to watch films. Overall, while my mother may just clean and scrub their floors, her employers have utter respect for her and love her. I do not know if that kind of bond can be fostered in the corporate world or in other professional settings. My mother's experience has been symbiotic; she has

learned from her employers, and they have learned from her. During my last visit home, I found out that she is applying for U.S. citizenship. She was encouraged by her employers to demand rights for herself and begin focusing on the future.

My mother and her stories of survival guide me throughout life. I see her as a superwoman who went to work all day long, then came home and attended to her family. The life that she has led for her children and the experiences that she has gone through as an immigrant to the United States for the benefit of her children are a constant reminder of why I need to wake up every morning. I would be throwing my mother's life away, disappoing and belittling her, if I did not. When I find myself at home caressing her work-worn hands, we grow closer as *madre e hija* (mother and daughter). It is imperative as women to find camaraderie among those who nourish us with love. Although my mother and I are linguistically distant and educational strangers, I need to be connected to my *raíces*—my roots.

I choose to get up and face the day so my family can live through me and I through my family. My family has not been endowed with monetary wealth, but they have been endowed with pride in their existence and love for others. I see their lives in me, and I will share their lives with others so that their experiences live on. Further, I am driven to find the voices of the many women who continue bending their backs, of neighbors who have died as a result of drug selling, of people who were denied an education, and of all women and children who have died in war. I have chosen to fight for and preserve their memories and dignities.

I remember something very hopeful my father told me. He said, "I plan to be a citizen to vote for a president, to put in the good and take out the bad." I immediately thought to myself, only if life were that simple and that sincere could that really happen. But my father believes in the good in life, as he should—as we all should. Like myself, *mi familia* is forever changing and assimilating, but like me, they selectively assimilate in order to retain a rich culture.

After graduation, Norma Andrade spent four years working in the field of adult literacy in Zambia, in Canada, and in her hometown of New York City. In 2003, she worked and acted in a theater company, *Tesit Duni*, creating and producing migrant and refugee stories from community members living in Montreal. Since then she has earned a master's of arts degree with a cross-disciplinary study of language, literacy, migration, and education at Columbia University. She is presently living in Seattle with her husband,

Alessandro Meléndez Living between the Lines

My pleasant experiences of a happy childhood in Puerto Rico were interrupted when my father lost his job and moved to the United States. At the age of eighteen, my oldest brother, Ricardo, left to go away to school. Finally, my mom, my sister Juanita, my brother José, and I emigrated from Puerto Rico to New Haven, Connecticut, in order to keep the family together. At age eleven, I was excited to see a brand-new place and couldn't imagine ever being able to return to my homeland.

As the oldest child, Ricardo had the responsibility of opening up the road of opportunity for his three siblings, especially for my sister. Ricardo was only a year older than Juanita; he was five years older than José, and seven years older than me. He began his studies in the state university without even knowing how to communicate in English. Living in New Haven was a tough transition for all of us. Although we had a few family members in New Haven, we were largely on our own trying to settle in the unknown, unfriendly environment of a small city in a foreign culture.

Ricardo enrolled in the U.S. Army Reserve and worked at a fast food restaurant to pay for his college tuition. At nineteen, he tackled the English language, his first year of college, a job, and the army. After five years, he was the first in our family to graduate from college, and he graduated with honors. From Ricardo, I learned I had a long and arduous road ahead in school, but I knew I would make it as long as I put all my efforts into what I wanted to accomplish.

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Juanita graduated from her high school at the top of the class, as everyone in my family must do, and entered college. When Juanita began to attend college, my mom placed her in Ricardo's hands, expecting him to protect and take care of her. I still remember attending their college graduations, where my mom's tears showed how proud she was of her children. In school, her children were expected to be the best in their class; no report card could be brought home unless straight. As appeared on all subjects. We knew that receiving anything less than an A meant a whipping with the thick leather belt. When my mom punished me, the red imprimis of the belt flared on my legs for hours. In my entire elementary school career, I received only one B on a math test in second grade and one C on a science test in fifth grade. I knew what I had coming to me if I came home with a C on my test, but I never received a whipping for being lazy and not doing my work in school. I graduated at the top of my class every year.

Disobeying our parents was the one rule we simply could not break. The only reasons my brothers and I could leave the house were to attend Catholic school, go to church, play baseball, or deliver newspapers. My mother's strict rules extended to our social lives, or what little social activity we were allowed to have. My brothers and I had friends in school and on the baseball teams, but interactions with the opposite sex were essentially forbidden. My brothers delivered newspapers around town and they were able to talk to girls then. As for me, I didn't have a relationship with a woman until my sophomore year in college. Although my mom's guidelines for our social development were rather strict, I believe she gave us a strong basis for our own personal moral standards. Therefore, the only relationships we have with members of the opposite sex tend to be extremely personal and serious.

As for my dad, he always provided for our well-being and established a secure place for us to accomplish what we could accomplish, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Although he never received his high school diploma, my dad has put four children through college. I truly admire him, and although we have never discussed our problems with each other, he has always been a pillar of strength I could hold on to. When I have needed courage and confidence, he has stood by me and helped me in every way he could; especially when the opportunity to attend prep school came along.

As my father and I drove into the town of Lewisburg, New Hampshire, I stared at the picture-perfect snow sparkling in the bright winter sun. The application I received a month before showed a great lawn on which a

group of students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds sat in a circle, books open, and a teacher sitting in the middle of the circle read to them. This was the picture I had in my mind the day I visited Lewisburg Academy for my final interview. (Lewisburg is not the school's real name; suffice it to say that the school is among the top five prep schools in the nation.) In the brochure, the students were dressed in casual clothes to attend classes, so I thought that I should try to fit in to this image.

As my father parked our red '77 Pontiac in the visitors' parking spot, I did not even feel a nervous twitch as I slammed the rust-ridden car door. I felt confident in the brand-new high-tops, blue jeans, and gray sweatshirt I had worn that day to public school. My father wore something similar except that his jeans were quite faded and worn in places where patches were needed. The receptionist showed us to the waiting room, which looked like the living room of a rather expensive house. Gazing around the room, I marveled at the antique sofas and chairs, the fragile coffee tables, and the gray stone fireplace. I carefully sat down on one of the sofas, afraid that it might break under my weight. As my father and I read the brochures about the prep school, another prospective student walked into the waiting room wearing a blue coat and tie, khaki pants, and brown leather shoes. I first thought, "Hm, he's overdressed!" but I remembered the receptionist's comment—"Hey, your sneakers match my dress. I should be wearing those!"—as I looked down at my discount sneakers and realized that I was the one wearing the inappropriate clothes.

The interview itself seemed short and pointless, as I answered with the same responses I had written on my application. As we drove away from the campus, my father told me that he had answered the questions he understood with the little English he could fragment together. I knew he had tried his best. He cared so much about my opportunity to get admitted that he would have done everything he could do to present me in the best light. After describing his interview, he asked me, "Do you think they will accept you?" Looking at my father's concerned expression, I knew he wanted me to reassure him that he had done his best. I responded solemnly, "I don't know, Dad. I don't think I did very well in the interview. But we'll see what kind of letter they send with their decision." I didn't want to disappoint my dad, but I also didn't want to raise his hopes without knowing for certain that I had a chance to attend prep school.

When I received the letter of acceptance from Lewisburg, my excitement was overwhelming. Since my parents were not fluent in English, I knew I would be the one handling all the financial, academic, and con-

muting arrangements. It would be my responsibility to read and translate all the application forms my parents had to sign. I realized that if I had decided to go to public school, my parents and I would have had an easier time. Not only was the high school within walking distance from home but the community and the school were both tightly intertwined with Latino culture and the Spanish language. I knew that I would definitely have an easier transition going to the public high school. However, I couldn't turn down this opportunity offered to only one member of my junior high school graduating class. I knew the decision had been made even before I made up my own mind. Such an opportunity for a prep school education was hard to turn down.

Although the prep school owned acres of green land on which stood buildings for every academic subject imaginable, I never felt as safe and as wanted there as I had in the long, three-story public school building that held classes for inner-city students. As soon as I was accepted to prep school, my junior high teachers and guidance counselor warned me that it would be a tough and challenging environment for me. However, they also encouraged me, saying, "Don't worry! If anyone deserves to go to Lewisburg Academy, it's definitely you. Good luck next year!" I arrived on campus as the smartest student from my junior high school, which really didn't amount to much in a class full of intelligent students from all over the country and the world.

The only person who introduced himself to me at the day-student orientation seemed like a good-natured guy. I had no idea then that he would turn out to be my best friend and crucial to my personal growth and success. Looking at the tall, blond, blue-eyed boy who stood before me, I remembered meeting him the day we took the national test required to apply to prep schools. With a warm, welcoming smile, he said, "Hey, how are you? Remember me? I'm Ben, and this is my grandmother." I smiled back and introduced my parents, quickly explaining that my mom couldn't understand English very well. My dad ventured into a small conversation with Ben's grandmother, who seemed rather patient trying to understand him. After saying good-bye we got into our cars, and I felt relieved; I had survived the first experience with my parents at prep school without any major embarrassments. I promised myself, however, that I would keep social engagements involving the presence of my parents to a minimum.

As I think back, I realize that my family and I lived in two distinctly separate worlds. My city flourished with the Latino culture, Spanish language,

and the bonds of community. Over the hill, the town of Lewisburg operated under the guidelines of the American culture, the English language, and a sense of individual success. Remembering my mom's fearful eyes masked under her smiling face, I now understand her feeling helpless in a world she could not comprehend. She did not possess enough English to express her feelings or concerns. As for my father, he always made a brave attempt at making people understand him. Although he has a thick Spanish accent, I have always been proud of how my dad has been able to take care of his own affairs with little or no help from me or my brothers.

My parents always taught me the importance of speaking in my native tongue. My mom made it clear that she expected us to speak only Spanish at home. She thought that the only reason we kids spoke English at home would be to discuss things we didn't want her to understand. I must admit that my brother and I usually did talk explicitly about girls in English, which always kept my mom in the dark. However, she encouraged us to speak Spanish in order to help us retain our culture and heritage. She reminded us every day, "I know you have to learn how to speak English, but don't forget your own language. Remember that you're my sons and that you are Latino. You will be able to get more in your life if you are bilingual." Speaking Spanish at home reinforced my Latino identity. Although I spent most of my day in the English-speaking world, when I came home from school at the end of my day to tell my mom about what I had done, I felt reassured to know that I would always be able to return to my community, no matter what happened in the English-speaking world.

The town of Lewisburg was very different from the city I lived in. In Lewisburg, the streets gleamed with the beauty of spring. The sun barely shone through the trees whose branches spread over the streets, providing a cool shade to those walking on the sidewalk. Green grass covered the front and backyards of the single-family homes. The houses were painted in bright, vivid colors that contrasted with the dull red bricks of the chimneys. The prep school proudly boasted about its great lawn and its beautiful fall and spring seasons, which could only be fully appreciated in the New England setting. On the other hand, in the city where I lived, the streets were too dangerous to walk at night. Covered with trash, they were the nocturnal skid marks from the tires of yet another stolen car. Trees were only seen in the common park across the street from the junior high school. Only narrow driveways divided the houses that were still standing most of the houses on the block had either been boarded up or demolished.

The three-family homes that were in good condition were painted dark dead colors. But no matter how awful the city was, it was the place I called home, where I yearned to return every night after the school day.

From the first day I arrived at Lewisburg, I felt intimidated by the enormous campus, the classes, and even the students. Like every freshman, I was lost in an unknown place in which we were told we either had to swim with the rest of the fish or drown. Prep school was a whole new world for me. The system I had learned in junior high school was simple. In order to get good grades, you behaved in class by not talking to other students and turned in your homework. Everything you needed to know to get a good grade would be on the board, and our chairs were all set in rows with the teacher's desk placed at the front so that we could only make eye contact with her. The public school assumption evident in the seating arrangement was that all we needed to learn would come from the teacher, so that was the only person we needed to see and the only person we should speak to. In the prep school system, the chairs were set in a semicircle around the room, with the teacher's desk placed at the opening of the semicircle so that everyone could see one another equally. The school assumed that we would learn from one another's ideas, so we needed to be able to see and speak to one another.

Waiting for the teacher to come in that first day of prep school, I sat silently not saying a word to any of my classmates. I had no idea what to say and could only repeat to myself over and over, "I don't belong in this place. Everyone here is smarter than I am. They'll just laugh at me if I speak in my Spanish accent." I was completely intimidated and petrified, wondering whether my fears would all come true in front of me that morning. As the bell rang, the teacher walked in to the room with nothing in her hands but her purse and house keys, which she dropped on the desk. I must admit that I was not expecting an African American teacher for English class. She introduced herself as Mrs. Brown and gave us the list of books that we would be reading for the term. Then she laughed and said, "Now that I've covered the course, do you think it would be all right if I spent the rest of the period getting to know you?" No one objected, and I felt some of the tension diminish. Mrs. Brown was the first teacher I had met who wanted to get to know her class. After writing journal entries for her for a year, I knew that she knew me better than any other teacher on campus. After four years, Mrs. Brown knew me well enough to recognize that Lewisburg had been a different experience for me as a Latino day student in a predominantly white prep school than it had been for most stu-

dents. It was Mrs. Brown who asked me to write about my experience at Lewisburg, which I was happy to do. During my first year at Lewisburg, I didn't risk taking any high-level classes. Every course on my schedule was carefully picked as the lowest-level course I could possibly take. My first term at Lewisburg was the toughest academic transition I had ever experienced. Even when I arrived in the United States and entered the sixth grade, I at least had the confidence that I could do well if I applied myself. At Lewisburg, I saw that hard work did not always pay off. I convinced myself that I obviously had not worked hard enough. In order to do well, I promised myself that academics would be my only priority and everything else, including sports and social life, would have to be accommodated to fit my academic work schedule. Although my mom didn't approve of me getting up at dawn and returning home well after dusk, she eventually understood I was trying to work hard and stopped nagging me about not spending enough time at home. I eventually compromised with my mom and decided to stay at home on the weekends when I didn't have any athletic events.

As a sophomore, I thought I finally had a handle on what I needed to do in order to earn good grades. I never thought I would stay up all night writing for my English class, but regardless of the length of the paper I would be up all night trying to figure out how to write down my thoughts. I became more critical of the way I wrote every single sentence. I convinced myself I couldn't merely write down what came into my head. The ideas had to sound more intelligent or sophisticated, which I could do by using big words and long sentences to sound as smart as my classmates. I never thought that my original ideas or word choices were appropriate for any part of my essays. Aware that the teacher might read the essay to the class, I wanted to make sure that I would present the best image of myself in my writing. I was willing to spend an enormous amount of time if it meant handing in a paper that read like the others. Therefore, I literally blocked off the nights of the week I would be writing. But although I had as long as I needed to work on papers, I couldn't avoid the time limits of in-class essays. Every time we were given forty-five minutes to write an essay in class, I ended up writing half of what I wanted to say and handing in a fraction of the writing my classmates did. You can't disguise yourself as a smart student when you pass in a paragraph and everyone else in the class has two pages.

Although I was still earning honors in my classes, I never felt that I was doing well enough. There was always someone I knew who was doing be-

ter and, in such a competitive environment, I learned to accept not being the best. Since Lindergarten, my parents had pushed me to be the very best and stand out from the rest of my classmates. Once I arrived at Lewisburg, I warned my mom, "I don't know how well I'm going to be able to do in prep school." Seeing my worried expression and fearful eyes, my mom hugged me and said, "I know it's a hard school. I just want you to work hard and do well for yourself, not for me."

Once I finally realized that I would push myself just as hard even if another activity took up some of my time, I decided to try out for the baseball team my junior year. By making the junior varsity team, I achieved my first accomplishment outside of the classroom. I felt so proud to have made the team that I didn't even care if I played in the games at all. All I ever wanted was to be part of the team, as being an athlete in prep school meant popularity and face recognition.

By senior year, I finally knew how to play the academic game and spent more time on campus participating in the activities I wanted to do. I realized that the key to classes included two things: taking classes taught by the teachers with whom I performed well, and simply doing a good job on the first exam or paper. As a senior, I took complete advantage of the system that I knew worked. I had my academics under control, I knew exactly what I had to do in order to get a good grade from each teacher. Even in my senior year, I still had few friends, and not many people on campus knew who I was.

As senior spring finally rolled in, I became actively involved with the community service program led by the school's priest. Father P. is the most generous man I have ever met. In addition to teaching classes and providing the Catholic services, he cooked and invited people over to eat dinner at his house practically every night. I became involved with his mentorship project tutoring public junior high school students. The kid I tutored, Mike, had the potential to become a great student, but he found he could have more fun leading his friends into trouble. I still remember the day I met him at the public school gym with all the other junior high kids. Mike called Father P. over and pointed at me, saying, "I want him to be my tutor." Mike was an African American child in the same school system I had come out of four years earlier. He had the initiative and drive of a leader. Unfortunately, he never used that energy and leadership to get his work done or finish his application for admission to Lewisburg. For the first time, I had the chance to give back to the community that had helped me survive the Lewisburg experience.

My best friend, Ben, was at my side throughout prep school. He gave me the courage to meet new people and participate in social events. I always felt awkward around people when he was not with me. Although we were completely different, Ben and I complemented each other. While Ben helped me develop social skills, I helped him develop his academic skills. We relied on each other to survive throughout the four years of academic and social torture we faced at Lewisburg. Ben was the exact opposite of me; he was the all-American boy, over six feet tall, blond hair, blue eyes, and a laid-back attitude about everything. In, on the other hand, was a Latino immigrant with dark skin, black hair, brown eyes, and a serious attitude toward my academic work. Ben had the confidence and charm, and I had the knowledge to back up his smart talk. No matter how different we seemed together, we shared a key aspect in common. As day students from the same city, we came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. We were definitely not part of the crowd whose parents were doctors, lawyers, or Lewisburg alumni. As financial aid students, Ben and I shared a completely different experience from all the boarding students and the wealthy day students. Although I never fit in to the social environment at Lewisburg, I never felt isolated because I had Ben as a friend. Every morning, I woke at dawn to walk downtown to the bus stop where Ben would be waiting for me. I still remember the early mornings when we stood waiting underneath the small sheltered bus stop as the sun rose over the river. From the time we got on the bus until we left for our first morning class, Ben and I would just talk about everything. Ben told me about his problems living at home with his grandmother, his job at the ice cream parlor, and his social life.

I think I learned everything I knew about the opposite sex in high school from Ben. I remember confessing once, "I really like Alicia but I don't even know how to let her know I'm interested." Ben gave me his usual wide smile because he knew how seriously I considered a crush on a new girl. He would always come up with some advice. "Why don't you spend some time with her helping her with Spanish class? We can come to the next dance and invite her." I always asked him questions I had about girls, dating, and sex. I began to develop an interest in girls after Ben began dating. When he shared his dating stories of dining out with a girl, I began to feel jealous because he was experiencing the feelings I had only talked about. Everything I thought and talked about regarding dating and women, Ben had the courage to go out and do, even if the girl rejected him. I never had the guts to flirt with a girl I liked, but Ben was confident about himself and had the type of personality that made girls laugh and talk to him.

As a poor Latino student, I never felt comfortable in the predominant white, wealthy environment of Lewisburg. The reason was not only the color of my skin but also the difference in culture. Although I felt isolated from the mainstream community, I never felt a need to look for the support of the school's small Latino and African American community. In the cafeteria, most of the black and Latino students always sat together in one corner of the dining hall. Although I knew some of the minority students, I never separated myself from the larger community. In turn, I think I also distinguished myself as an individual who did not belong to one particular group. The few friends I had were day students that attended the same classes as I did. I didn't really talk to them enough to tell them everything I was thinking about. Most of the day students knew me because I was the only dark-skinned Latino among them. I felt that Ben was truly the only person who saw past the color of my skin and stopped asking me about how tough it must be for me in a place like Lewisburg. From the first day we took the bus together, Ben wanted to get to know the person I had grown to be, not as an immigrant in the United States.

The day students often asked me, "Why are you friends with Ben?" They labeled him as an outcast because he didn't conform to their group standards. Ben never cared about how he dressed, mainly because he had no money to spend on the clothes that were in style. He never seemed to get his academic work done between working nights and weekends and taking care of his grandmother. We were best friends simply because we understood and lived in each other's situations. Knowing that he faced the same problems and circumstances made me feel like I was not the only one struggling through my adolescent years. He was the one person I placed my complete trust in. Even if he didn't have answers, at least I knew that we would be lost together in the trials of adolescent relationships.

During my four years at Lewisburg, I only faced a single blatantly racist episode, which pulled together my feelings of isolation and intimidation. I played on the junior varsity football team as a senior and I was one of two dark-skinned linemen. As we lined up two by two, I faced Tony, the only other dark-skinned lineman. We set up in our three-point stance in front of the tackling sled and I waited for the coach's whistle to signal us to push the sled. Before the whistle, I heard someone yell, "Here come the *brothers*." At the whistle, I slammed all my anger into the sled as if I was pushing the words back into my teammate's mouth. Although I was furious, I went straight to the back of the line. A day student friend came up to me after practice and said, "I told him that you weren't black but that you were

Hispanic. And he said, 'I guess I should have called him a spic, huh!'" Although I had been called "nigger" on two occasions by strangers, I had never experienced racism from a group of people I felt I was a part of, such as the members of my team. I never told anyone except Ben about the incident, and I never faced the teammate who made the comment. After that episode, I saw the campus with a new perspective; I knew I couldn't trust everyone in the so-called multicultural community of the prep school.

During the winter break of my sophomore year, my older brother José and I discussed our experiences in prep school. José and I shared a bedroom when he was home from school, and as we lay in our beds, innocently asked him, "How is school going?" We never had the opportunity really to talk to each other about the one thing we shared in common, prep school. As we began to talk, I felt a sense of relief as he began opening up to me. With tears in my eyes, I told him how hard it was for me to do well in school, how I had no idea how to get a girl to like me, and how lonely I felt with all my siblings away at school. He never saw the tears roll out of my eyes in the darkness, but he knew how I felt. We shared all of our experiences, fears, and expectations, as if trying to get everything we had been holding back off our chests. He told me about his first girlfriend, how lonely he felt in school without me and our family, and how he never knew how to really talk to me when I was young. Throughout the winter, my brother and I spoke late into the night, trying to catch up with each other's lives. We had missed out on too much in a year and a half away from each other. During that winter break, I shared and learned more from my brother than ever before with any other family member.

Therefore, when the time came to choose what college I would attend I decided I would not let the opportunity to be with my brother pass me by. I had the chance to get a good education anywhere, but I only had one brother to learn from and spend time together for what could be the last carefree years of our lives. Although it took me some time to adjust to Dartmouth College environment, I finally got my goals straight with my brother at my side.

At the start of my freshman fall semester, I found it hard to make friends so I immersed myself in the college's Latino community in order to meet people. I ended up learning more about myself than about other people and learned to proudly define who I am. During the first term, I joined Latino theater group organized and run by other Latino students. At the first meeting of the group, I was cast in a play in the role of a strident, right-hand man to the main character. A week before opening night,

April, the girl who founded the group and was producing the play, to see a rehearsal. After watching the first scene, she made us all stop in our tracks for what turned out to be the talk that made me fully recognize who I am.

"Do you all realize what this play is about? Have you thought about the issues this play addresses?" she asked.

April looked each one of us in the eyes. Silence filled the auditorium. I had never stopped to think at all about what the play meant.

"I just want you all to know that this play is about you and me. This play talks about the things that haunt our Latino community at home and here at school. We all know what they are . . . or do we?"

I still had no idea what to say. I only felt guilty for not taking the play seriously.

"Ernesto shows the problems within the Latino community. Ernesto deals with an issue we all hate to talk about and even think about, but one that we have to deal with. Ernesto talks about the issue of skin color in our own community." April continued to stare into our lowered gazes. "Ernesto speaks about what it means to be black in the Latino community, and how we ourselves are ashamed of our own African roots. Do you all even realize that we have a black Latino in our cast?" April looked at me and I stared back at her. Never had I even heard those two words together: black and Latino. Until April said it, I had never recognized the color of my skin as being part of my identity. I looked around and realized that I was the only black Latino on stage in the auditorium, and, with the exception of my own brother, on the campus.

After April's final question the whole cast fell silent, and I knew I had to break the silence. "I guess I've never thought of myself as a black Latino. When I was young, my mom always took my brother and me to the barber to get our monthly haircuts. She always said that we looked better with short hair and that way we wouldn't have to deal with our afros," I said. Since I was a young child, my mother raised us to believe that we were Latino above everything else. She never mentioned the fact that two of her children were light skinned and two were dark skinned. Skin color had never been an issue when I lived on a Caribbean island. Until I reached the United States, and particularly college, I was not aware of the politics of skin color. Even in the Latino organization and community, I noticed I was the only dark-skinned male in the group. I didn't quite fit in the Latino community that was supposed to be a support group for me. The only

other person in the Latino community at college who understood what I experienced every day was my own brother.

As I began to meet students outside of the Latino circle, I found the friends who have given me the confidence and the courage to go after what I wanted. When I joined a black fraternity, I found friends who pushed me to my limits but stood by me at all times. The brothers of the fraternity made me see myself in a new light. One night, a brother asked me to stop by his room to talk. As he walked up and down the room, he just smiled.

"Have you ever looked at yourself, I mean really looked at who you are?" he asked. I just stood quietly because I didn't know how to respond. He said, "Look at yourself. You are a Latino man at one of the best colleges in the country. You have a good GPA, you are an athlete, and you have a job."

Not many people can do all that at this place." I guess I have always done whatever it took to make it. In prep school, I had to stay at home in order to keep focused on my academics and avoid the elitist attitudes of the students. In college, I had to focus on academics by keeping myself busy in different areas of work and sports. I simply stared at him blankly. He realized he had not gotten his point across, and said, "I guess I'm going to have to break this down for you. You have the physique, the looks, and the mind to get everything you want on this campus. You have done it in class and on the field. And the only thing that's stopping you from going after women is your self-confidence. I'm here to tell you that just by looking at you, there is nothing that can stop you. When you realize that for yourself, you will understand what I have said." I left his room with a silly grin on my face. I knew I had received good news about how others perceived me, but I had no idea what to do with it. My first instinct was to run and tell my friends, but my friends might have thought I was incredibly conceited. "He's so full of himself," they would have said. And that's exactly how I felt. I felt full of my self. That brother made me step out of my body look at, and judge myself. As a friend and a brother, what did I have to offer? I had more than I had ever imagined.

As I look back, I now know that I stood in between the black fraternal and Latino community. My worst fear came true: I was not part of any or group and never will be. As a black Latino on a small campus, I found a way to define and redefine my identity from the perspectives of both African American and Latino communities. In my journey, I followed the voices that helped me reevaluate myself. Through those voices, I saw another piece of my "self," another piece of what it means to be a black

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Latino. I just hope I can be a new voice for those who live between the lines.

Alessandro Meléndez is currently in his medical residency training in a Boston area hospital. After working for three years as a research assistant in basic science research, Alessandro chose to return to his island Puerto Rico for medical school where he graduated with honors. He has returned to the Northeast to continue the journey to his true identity. He continues to live somewhere between his island culture and the life determined by the color of his skin.

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Ki Mae Ponniah Heussner currently lives in New York City and is the Manager of Public Affairs and Advocacy for Lifetime Entertainment Services. Still enamored with the capacity of language to validate experience and provoke action, she designs and manages many of the network's award-winning public education and advocacy campaigns. She also suffers from insatiable wanderlust and exits the country as often as she can.

from
idunary Two Worlds: ASIAN AMERICAN
LUCAS STUDENTS Tell THEIR LIFE
FORCES ed. A. Girard et al. Cornell
.P. 2007.

Anthony R. Luckett Multihued

On Being Asian

They asked me to write about why choosing
or choosing not to choose sides is relevant
in my life.

I told them that before my thoughts could travel from mind to mouth
I heard the universe whisper life into my mother's womb.

Lucky me.

I might have survived the sound of feet mumbering destiny
while reading a novel on a love unfulfilled.

He book marked where love had been emptied and
now I'm pessimistic.

I'd give up but which way is up to me?

Where is down to earth when I can't stop thinking about having left heaven.

I've danced with angels and solved multiracial differential equations
in three dimensions. I stand in the fourth now speaking

about the three axial frames of reference and not one of them
described what it was to be Asian.

Sometimes, when I'm not being Korean,

I speak Koglish with my mother and eat Kimchee
alone in my dorm so my roommates can't smell it. . . .

I hum Ah-Ri-Rhang to my dreams so they and sleep can be lovers.

Under the covers in the dark I imagine myself with straight hair

and a grandmother that cooks for me every night despite her own desires.

But when I close my double eyes in private I remember my birthright

birthplace and inner fires.

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If I had a leg for every time I've been asked whose side I would have taken in the Riots, the earth would be a ball of flame and we'd wander lost in our lust to label everything we see because for every sort of people you think I might be, they all know they're not in me . . . and all I hear are voices in my head still asking questions that don't move me any more.

I'm black and Korean, devoid of sympathy for culture vultures that circle over my head, a fateful halo reminds me that it's time to be free of the 38 parallels I've seen folks draw on me . . . They asked me to write about why choosing . . . or choosing not to choose sides is relevant in my life. I told them that before my mouth was informed by mind that I piggy backed the universe's spine and tapped into my Chi . . . Lucky Me.

I might not have survived nearly four years of fate's interpretation of destiny. But. Here I am.

On Being Black

I feel as if I am an interloper in a land where the packed snow smells of watermelon.

And I traverse the hills picking snowflakes and spitting seeds that plant themselves in my journey.

Walking in circles.

My racial profile eludes my facial style.

I don't look the part.

and I am Black by association.

Misappropriate usage of my visage has been the ground on which I walk alone treading the Mason-Dixon poverty line.

Perforated like my spinal cordless phonetic Nile tones.

I'm light skinneded.

Where do I fit in next to "I've seen you before?" and "my cousin look just like you's"? And, because I've got Seoul in the windows of my soul, I've also heard "He ain't just Black I told you so's." So.

Sometimes when I'm not being Black, I speak in Ebonics and quote Cash Money's Greatest Hits.

I purposely fail tests just to see . . . just to see if I'm keepin' it real. I walk

slowly and strut, nod to say "what's up dogge, pease, ah-light, that's tight, smoke? Nah, shit shory and hey, My Nigga."

I've got my finger on figuring it out but when I'm out of my mind what is in sane?

My father gave me the greatest lesson on what a black man should be by not being around for me to follow his bad example.

Now jazz is my mother and Hip Hop my sample of what daddies be like. I feel as if I've intruded into a land where the snow smells of watermelon and I'm no longer picking cotton snowflakes but bad decisions.

Once that spit the seeds of a freer future plantation.

Walking in circles enshrined by miracle manacles I be dazzled and unfocused.

Black by association.

And, I don't look the part that's played me.

only.

time isn't planted with watermelon seeds.

I felt the beat of my mother's chest against the side of my face. Drowsily I looked up and out of the taxicab window. I fell back to sleep against my mother's chest. I was snug and clinging to Mom as best I could. Finally, we stopped. Mom nudged me awake and brought me out of the car. There was a large wood house in front of me. There were two shadows in the doorway of this house. I walked into the house and sat down at a table and put my head down. My eyes were cracked open, and I caught sight of Mom talking with one of the shadows. They spoke and spoke. Then without warning, Mom started walking out the door and I ran after her. As I descended the steps in front of the house I saw Mom get back into the cab. The tailpipe exhaust made the red lights erie at night as the cab drove off and I screamed, "Mommy! Where are you going? Mommy!" I couldn't say anything else. I was so shocked that she would just leave me. All I saw were the red taillights getting smaller and smaller and more and more blurry as my tears fell.

The lady escorted me back into the house. As I sat down at the table, the man and woman looked at me. She began to peel a tangerine and asked me if I wanted any. No, I didn't want any! I wanted my Mom. I wanted my Mom. The impact of my mother leaving left me speechless for a long, long time. I remember sitting at that table for what felt like hours—long enough for there to be veins of salt down my cheeks where the tears had tumbled. There were things running through my body and soul that I didn't have the words to fit to. All through my childhood, that image of the

dwindling taillights haunted me because I still hadn't come to terms with being left in the care of strangers. The household that I was born into had fallen apart by the time I was four years old. This is how my story begins.

I was born in Suwon, Korea, to a Korean mother and African American father. In less than a year, my mother, father, and I moved to London, England, where my mother had a job as a model and teacher, and my father was still in the service of the United States Air Force. We somehow ended up in San Francisco, California, where we lived near an air force base. I don't remember moving, just being in different places and different feelings that came with it. I don't remember having friends, and I wasn't allowed to be in the same room as my father when he and his friends watched adult movies and smoked. He flickered in my mind until his presence disappeared.

When I was left with the tangerine family, each day was like awaking from one bad dream into another. They were a white family. Looking back, I cannot remember a time when I felt like I was a part of that family, perhaps, because my recollection of the negative outweighs the occasional happy moments that I can only vaguely remember. My memory serves me tidbits of history salvaged after a tumultuous beginning to life. One of the most enduring memories I have of my time there was the way I spent a number of my weekend mornings on nice days. The fannies were handed to me by one of my foster parents, Jim and Marcy. A hand on my shoulder turned me toward the side door, and I was asked to go outside and read. Jim gave me a hasty nod and told me it was OK to go outside in my underwear. I was uncomfortable but didn't know what to say. I walked slowly out of the door and sat down on the picnic bench with the fannies. Before I started reading I carefully screened the surroundings for onlookers. I opened the pages slowly, hesitantly, and read at an even slower pace. Systematically, I scanned the premises for onlookers as I read the fannies. When I was done with the fannies, I thought it would be all right to go back inside the house; I felt as if my reading the comics was a punishment. I stood up and walked up to the screen door, and it was locked. When I finally got back inside it wasn't long before I was outside again; at least I was clothed on my return excursions. The words were usually, "It's nice out, so why don't you go outside?" Those innocuous words never really sparked any real thought until I heard them repeated over and over again. Nobody ever wanted me *in* the house. It wasn't as if I truly wanted to be inside so much as I wanted to belong. I just wanted to feel accepted, but nobody

wanted to know what I wanted. I missed my Mom, and I didn't like living with this tangerine family.

My unstable disposition was kept aflame by my anger and aggression. In school I was your typical problem child—the kid who doesn't keep quiet, who is always running around and won't listen. My rage would cause me to get into fistfights, and I can even recall throwing a chair across the classroom at another student and hitting the teacher by mistake. My tangerine family foster father, Jim, was called and that night he spanked contempt and embarrassment into my backside at the dinner table. It didn't hurt anything but my pride.

In retrospect, I suppose I should be grateful that a family would take me in and care for me for as long as they did. I suppose that I should thank them for providing a roof over my head and food for me to eat. I suppose that I would indeed be grateful if it were not for memories riddled with nightmares and a feeling of emptiness that fills my gut. Each day I was made to feel as if I wasn't wanted. The house was a large beautifully crafted wood house with a basement, two floors, and an attic. They kept bees on the side of their house to collect honey to sell. The garage was a bottomless pit of baubles, toys, auto parts, and other things that families accumulate over years. The pond behind the house was connected to a creek that was filled with tadpoles. The woods were deep and magnificent. Unfortunately, there was no home for me in that picturesque niche down a quarter of a mile driveway off of Whitney Road. When I think back, the darkness overshadows the light. There were things that happened in that niche that my mother does not know about to this day. The worst part about that tale is that Jim and Marcy knew—and did nothing to protect me.

Jim's father must have been in his sixties when I met him. He was a large heavyset man with gray stubble, a dirty T-shirt, and a dirty odor. I didn't care much for him so I never understood why they ever left me alone with him. They knew what he did on those walks out in the woods at night. He would lead me around behind the pond, and we'd sit on the bench. In a gruff voice he'd ask me if I liked him. I was frozen because even the first time it happened didn't seem like the first time it happened. His coarse hands would find their way on to my back and the friction would rattle my tiny six-year-old frame. His large body overwhelmed me as his large hands found their way off of my back and into my pants. I felt his stubble on my face and in my mouth. I wanted to scream but couldn't. Who would come? Jim and Marcy knew already; I was certain, and Mommy was not there. He touched me where I hadn't even discovered myself and asked again if I liked

him. No, I did not like him! I wanted him to go away but I couldn't tell him that. I sat quiet and wished that it would end sooner and sooner each time. I hated walking with Jim's father.

Jim and Marcy were aware because one night after I had "taken a walk," they asked me what happened on the walk with Grandpa. "He touched me here," I said pointing to my groin. "And kissed me. Then he touched me here . . ." There was a pause as the two stood there. The sad truth is I don't remember that being the last night that he sapped, rubbed away, and swore to secrecy my childhood with his sixty-plus-year-old mouth, disturbing hands, and five o'clock shadow.

Of all the bad things I remember, the most difficult to deal with was the fact that something bad was happening to me, and my foster *parents* knew. They knew, and they knew that I knew they knew, and still nothing. No protection, no nothing—except for more walks with Grandpa. I didn't feel as if it was my *fault*, but for some perverted reason I thought that I might have *deserved* treatment like that. If everybody knew, maybe it was normal, but part of me knew it couldn't have been. I don't remember too much else about the tangerine family; their faces are murky images of exaggerated features. Fortunately, life is very different for me now. But family secrets have to start somewhere.

I had come to terms with what had happened during the summer after my senior year of high school, but I was twenty years old when I finally came around to writing about this incident.

The
Hands
That!
Rock
My
Cradle
Kill
Me.

the night that cried for those
to stop
Stop That! . . . Stops that
my brain,
pains to sleep in that
made for one . . . I would still
the night that cried for

There is a part of me that would commit murder to regain the innocence, security, and trust I had taken from me on those walks. Motherfuckers! I will never forget what I lost there. I often wonder what life would have been like had I not lived with that tangerine family: Jim, Marcy, and

their children. It is difficult to think outside of the past because my history is documented in who I am as a person. Scholars say that a child's personality is shaped by the time he is five years of age. I'm beginning to think there is some truth to that. I was dealt a pair of incompatible, strong-willed parents and confusion, chaos, and abandonment before the age of five. I sometimes wonder how I got through four years with Jim and Marcy's family—misbehaving in school, missing my mother, and all the while feeling I didn't belong.

When my mom finally came to get me out of that tiny niche on Whitney Road when I was eight years old, I didn't know then that I would move twice more before the fifth grade. I moved next to Astoria, Queens, in New York, where I lived with my mom's friend, Kyoung. I attended parochial school for the third grade and just as the school year ended, I moved back to Ohio.

This time Ohio was different. I stayed with a Korean woman named Young. She lived with a Tae Kwon Do instructor and her two sons, Tony, age sixteen, and Andy, age fourteen. The few months that I was with this family, a number of things came to light. I found out that my mother was paying for me to live there when Young became increasingly angry with me for no reason that I could see. Tony pulled me aside one day after I had been yelled at and told me that his mother wasn't angry with me but was angry with my mother because she hadn't paid. Hadn't paid? Why hadn't she paid? I wondered. I understood that raising someone costs money, but why hadn't she paid? Young once told me that she was raising me because my mom didn't know how to take care of me. She said that if my mom left me I would have nothing to worry about because she would take care of me. As hard as I found that to believe since the lady was always angry with me, I wanted to believe that I had nothing to worry about. Her offer, though strange and twisted to me, sounded somewhat inviting since I hated moving and I didn't know what to believe.

Young's words seared my ears, and the thought of mom not returning haunted me. As it turned out, mom also had paid Jim, Marcy, and Kyoung. This new information forced the connection in my mind between my mom's missed payments and the treatment I was receiving. I resented both my foster families and my mother. It was difficult enough to comprehend these families being paid for my care, but I really resented the thought that my mother would dare miss a payment. My resentment was twofold. First, the untainted perception I had of my mother began to soil. Then, when I

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began questioning my mother, I began losing faith in my own judgment and trusted no one. In a matter of months, Mom came back and moved me once again.

It was in the middle of the fourth grade that I arrived in New York City for the second time. This time it was the Woodside section of Queens where I stayed with the Kims until I went away to college. At this house were the head of the family, "Uncle," his wife, and their two sons, James and John. The Kims had six other foster children in addition to me. All of the kids in Uncle's care attended Public School 11 only five blocks away. Most of the class dismissed me as the new kid dressed in hand-me-downs until people noticed that I was artistically inclined and athletically adept—which was at least a start and more than I had ever had before. School didn't mean much to me until I reached the sixth grade, where I met Mr. Meadow. He was the first person to take a genuine interest in my abilities as a student, athlete, and scientist. His charisma would fill the room, and the amount of passion and energy he devoted to his students was peerless. Mr. Meadow motivated my curiosity, intelligence, and creativity. He changed my outlook on school and on myself.

Mr. Meadow was about five feet ten inches and had what I can only describe as a white Afro, only his hair isn't thick and he isn't black. He looked a lot like pictures I had seen of Mark Twain. He let me sit in the back of class with the microscope. I would bring in samples of dirty water that I had retrieved from various sources in the neighborhood. When my face was in that microscope the world around me did not exist. I watched in awe the paramacia and other microorganisms swimming around in the water. The truth is that I was teacher's pet, and I liked it even if some other people didn't like it. Mr. Meadow's spirit was very apparent to me, and I basked in his presence. He used to tell me to train for the decathlon before I knew what one was. He always asked that I remain true to myself and taught me not to be influenced by others. One conversation we had shines above all others. We had been talking and then he looked into my eyes. "Tony, don't ever change. I'm serious. Don't ever change. O.K.?" I didn't know how to react to the solemnity behind his words, so all I could muster was a simple nod of affirmation. Don't change? I couldn't understand the full meaning of what he was trying to say or how to take it truly to heart. His investment in me was matched by my desire to learn from him and the genuine respect I had for this man who respected me and believed in me. He helped to erase a great deal of my self-doubt, and he built my confidence.

I wish my life at school were even remotely representative of my life in

the Kim residence. Perhaps it would be asking too much of life to have things go well in both worlds. During my stay with the Kim family, I never once felt as if I was a part of the family. Aside from the mistrust they had of the world in general, the way in which they ran a family was not healthy. According to the Korean old school of thought, children were commodities and were to be seen and not heard.

I distanced myself from everything in the Kim's household except from Uncle's son James. He was the only member of that family with whom I felt I had any connection. The Kims owned two apartments on the same floor of the building. James and I stayed in apartment 4D with his grandmother while the rest of the family lived in apartment 4B. James and I would stay up late playing video games or watching television. Sometimes, we'd play basketball together and for about a year, he was one of my Tae Kwon Do instructors. James also tutored me in math. He was my older brother and I looked up to him. We never spoke about what I was truly feeling except for once.

"You know bro, I've never really felt at home here," I said to James softly. "I know. I can understand that."

"It's like . . . well, it's not like I'm very upset that I wasn't a part of this family because, well . . . you know . . ."

"Yeah," he said as he shook his head.

"It's kind of sad, bro," I said.

"It is. That it is," he said softly.

A moment of silence overtook the room and he gave me an understanding nod, as if to say he understood my discomfort of never feeling "at home" and my struggle to get away. I was sad that I had lived with a family for almost a decade and never felt truly welcome there. Beyond not feeling welcome, I was so uncomfortable I didn't like being in the physical presence or close vicinity of Uncle or Auntie. So that I could spend the least amount of time at home with the Kims I would go out as much as I could and stay out late, and I was as active as I possibly could be in high school. Looking back I can see the irony that at age six I was always upset at being made to stay out of Jim and Marcy's house, twelve years later I was doing everything I could to stay out of the house. "Men don't run from their problems." Who could have taught me this? Jim? The Tae Kwon Do instructor? Tony or Andy? Uncle? James? I wouldn't know. Though I picked up pieces of manhood from each of them along my path of development, I am unclear how to apportion to what extent these male foster figures have affected me.

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With loneliness as my companion and introspection my bedfellow brooded over the questions that challenged my understanding of my circumstances, my mother, and the world around me. The changes happening to my body only contributed to my confusion and lack of understanding. While undergoing these changes in my life, Mom was still sporadic beacon of light, and while I took her for granted, Mom was still predicament and wanted more from her than just an escape from my current environment. I wanted attention and to belong. The difficulty of dealing with my loneliness was more than feeling I didn't belong in my various foster homes—it was complicated by my developing racial identity. I had lived with one white family, a single Korean woman, and two very different Korean families. But I am Korean and black. No one I lived with could fully understand what it was to be a mix of two separate minority worlds, and until later in my life, neither could I.

I always knew that I was different. With the tangerine family it was obvious, especially when they would pick me up from school. Everywhere I went, including New York City, I managed to warrant a second look. This made me so terribly self-conscious that I was embarrassed by my heritage. I remember once, Mom and I were on the subway. I sat next to Mom who was dressed in a white linen outfit and sat reading the latest volume of *Korean Health Digest*. As I sat there, I stared around me and secretly hoped that no one was staring back. I don't know whether it was the book she was reading or the clothes she was wearing, but I felt like everyone on the train was looking at us. My uneasiness at her presence was displayed on my face. I was so unused to being in my mother's presence that it was as if she were some strange foreigner reading her magazine right next to me. Then she turned to me and began speaking Korean in front of everyone. As her native language entered my ears, perfectly intelligible, I wanted her to stop. My brusque responses to her were in English, my native language. But she was happy speaking to me that way, showing her affection. But she have been too, but instead I was overwhelmed by feelings of embarrassment. I was certain that everyone on the train could see that I was not fully Korean and so was wondering why this woman was speaking to me in that tongue. Not coincidentally, that is exactly what I was wondering, too.

I will never forget that painful train ride with Mom in which the most important thing to me was not wanting a subway car full of strangers to know that I spoke or understood my mother's native language. I felt as if she were determined to make me fully Korean. The language barrier that exists between us has really hindered our relationship. On the one hand,

mom is this loving person, her caring and warmth just flowing over me, on the other hand, my mother is a person whom I've had very little time to get to know. My mom has been absent nearly all my life, yet strangely enough she knows me a lot better than I have given her credit for. That day on the train she looked deep into my eyes as she was speaking to me and then stopped and went back to reading her magazine. It was as if she had sensed my innermost thoughts; the discomfort and conflict I sat with. So for the rest of the journey we rode in silence.

I have always prided myself on being different, but for a long time, I felt funny. The type of "funny" that I felt the first time I heard someone call me a "Chink," an experience only matched by the first time I was called a "nigger." As the hapless victim of the synergy in being the biracial new guy, I have always been conscious of my differences, externally and internally. To my Korean friends I always felt like the token black guy. To those two black men who passed me on 43rd Avenue one indelible night, I was a "Chink." The powerful feelings of contempt and racism are vivid and lasting. So permanent, that I revisit them every now and again. What is it that people see when they look at me, and why do their furtive stares make me uncomfortable? As I attempt to answer these questions, I find myself caught in life's gauntlet of self-discovery.

During my years in high school I had not fully come to terms with my racial identity, but at least my relationship with my mother was getting better. It was no consolation that we couldn't be together, but I began to realize that she had really wanted the best for me all along. The sacrifice my mother made transcends human emotion and reason, at least to any American or any non-Korean way of thinking. My mother gave up her life so that I might have a better chance at success than she. In my selfish adolescence, I was unable to recognize her strength, humility, and sacrifice. After my freshman year at college, however, I was blessed with the opportunity to fully appreciate my mother's gift of life and my responsibility for it.

By the time I had finished my first year at college I had not seen my mother since my high school graduation. I spent the summer working to raise enough money to visit my mother in Houston, Texas. I had changed since I last saw her. My first year of college had filled my life with new academic and extracurricular experiences, and I had braided my hair in cornrows and put on fifteen pounds. What would she think? As I disembarked the plane my mother stood at the gate anticipating my arrival. I saw her radiant five foot five inch frame uprearing, almost hovering. Her caring eyes scanned each passenger with X-ray precision and surprisingly looked

right through me. I nearly passed her before she recognized who I was. In an instant, her eyes lit up and her smile increased tenfold and her arms reached out for me. "Oh my goodness! I almost didn't recognize my Tony—so handsome and tall. Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed. It certainly had been a long time.

When we arrived at the apartment my mother had been living in for some time, I couldn't help but notice it looked like she had just moved in, because of the lack of any furnishings. In the living room there was a table on which was a small pewter picture frame with a picture of us on my sixteenth birthday. The kitchen had not been touched. My thoughts echoed off of the bare walls as I helped to put away the groceries we had bought for dinner. I asked my mother why there wasn't anything in her house. I could almost hear her response before she answered: she spent so much of her time working that she had no need for an apartment to look and feel comfortable. Before I could even enjoy having spent twelve hours with Mom, she had to go to help out at the store where she worked.

When she came home she began cooking. I helped her for a short while, then relaxed and sat watching her in action from the living room. We finally sat down to a feast, and I gorged myself and we spoke. It wasn't the kind of hapless chatter that you might expect two people to have after a long separation. Every gesture and word was a conversation in its own right. The synergy of mother and child contributed to the regenerative air in that humble room. We finished our meal, and I remember her teasing me about my hair. She didn't want me to have jogg hair, and she also didn't like my cornrow braids. Seeing through my snappy excuses she said, "You don't always have to wear your culture out like that." I spent all night thinking about her insight.

My last day in Houston came quickly. I packed quietly and wore a smile of satisfaction on my face. I was happy that I had the opportunity to see my mother. She offered her motherly words of wisdom as the taxi pulled up to her door. I asked the driver if he would take pictures of my mother and me together. He took a step back and aimed the camera at us. I told Mom to get on my back and when she did, I carried her around the parking lot. Her laughter was so pure I almost collapsed. When I let her down, I hugged her as the driver snapped another picture. After giving my mom the biggest hug and kiss any son could muster, I called on the Lord's strength to prevent my tears from surfacing. It wasn't that I was afraid of being unmanly. I just chose not to cry all the tears behind the ones on the surface. If I started, she would too, and I don't think the taxi driver was prepared to

deal with a bawling mother and equally torn son, so I stared out of the taxi window and smiled. She stood there waving back with the same painful grin on her face. As the car pulled away I felt as if my brain was saturated from holding back all of the contentment and tears. I made small talk with the driver during the ride to the airport.

I thought about her meager living conditions and how blessed I was to have a mother who cared about me so much. I have been asked why she didn't keep me by her side. Other people have questioned her motives for placing me in the foster care of other families. This visit answered my own questions. It is difficult to put into words what my mother's burden is. Like many traditional Korean parents she wanted for me all that she had missed in her own life. She dropped out of college to work to support me when I was six or seven. And although I moved many times to different foster families, I was uprooted less often than she was during that time. As the object of her love, I felt obligated to my Korean heritage and how important it is to her that I don't lose what little I know. I thought about her words of advice that I don't always have to "wear my culture out." I felt as if I did in order to remind myself of my own background. It was a constant struggle. The pride I had for my mother's heritage was countered by the overwhelming negative feeling I got when she would overemphasize my Koreaness. At one point, she asked if I would change my last name from that of my father to her own. I was torn up by the powerful nature of that request. It was as if she wanted me to discard my blackness or to destroy the traces I had of my father's heritage. On one hand, my father was absent from my life so why should I carry his name? On the other hand, my name has been my basic identity since I was born. In the end, I didn't change my name and my mother understood.

Race matters. And it doesn't. I cannot detach myself from the biracial aspects of my background. Though I state this obvious fact about my racial identity, I sometimes wonder how my life would have been different if I were just of a single race. I have been told that I have benefited by having received the best of both worlds. And while I have been exposed to both the ugliness and benefits of multiracial life, I have not felt the need to choose one side of my racial background over the other. I have reached a level of comfort where I am proud of all that I am. In some respects I would say that I am more of a New Yorker culturally than either Korean or black. For me, the distinction is important. Race and culture are synonymous when people with a similar history or genetic make-up share common life experiences unique to their heritage. There is no singular black experience

in America that I can identify with. Neither is there any definitive Korean or multiracial experience. To say the very least, growing up multiracial has never been dull. But my racial composition is deeply intertwined with all the important relationships in my life. My relationships with my mother, with friends, and with the opposite sex all reflect the intricate connections between different parts of my life.

An important illustration of this connectivity is how I have interacted with the opposite sex. I have not had much difficulty attracting women because of my physical appearance, which undoubtedly has to do with my multiracial look.

But physical attractiveness has not been the only source of my appeal. Because I have craved the attention of women from the day my mother left me with the tangerine family, over the years I have developed a personality and demeanor that commands attention. Merely attracting women, however, has not solved my loneliness or other interpersonal problems. The obstacle to my having more meaningful and satisfying intimate relationships is rooted in all of the baggage I bring to the table when I get involved in a relationship. Since everything is connected, many of the ways in which I interact with my mother have carried over into my intimate relationships. It therefore makes sense to me that I am an emotionally difficult person to get to know. It seems reasonable and rational to me that I can love someone and then leave her in a heartbeat.

These patterns are a reality in my life. I believe that the lack of family and maternal stability while I was growing up has fostered my pick-up-and-go mentality when it comes to intimacy. I have had to be somewhat callous emotionally to avoid breaking down. My perspective has undergone a number of changes with each new relationship. In the past year I have made conscious efforts to dim the glowing lack of faith I have in womanhood. I feel betrayed in many ways by girls I date. Perhaps I am holding them accountable for my subconscious disappointment with my nomadic lifestyle, and because everything is so short-lived.

It is easier for me to become physically involved with a woman than to invest any serious emotions or real love. The few times that I have really trusted and loved, the relationship failed to survive long distances and miscommunications. Emotional self-preservation overshines my desire for true companionship and so I have closed off parts of myself. In addition to repressing parts of my personality, at the start of a new relationship I determine just how much feeling I am willing to put into a particular relationship, and I seldom deviate from that plan. Some people say that a

person should love like they've never loved before, but what about hurting like never before? A guiding truth is that I don't want to hurt like I have before. Every time I grow close to someone, thoughts of long distances and miscommunications remind me of past pains. Many of my friends, past girlfriends, and sexual partners have questioned my dead-end response to them:

Why don't you just let go of your past?

Why can't you just enjoy us right now?

Can you stop dwelling on what went wrong before?

Why don't you want to be with me?

Why don't you just open up?

How could they not know that, of course, I have asked myself the same questions a thousand times over.

"My future wife is not enrolled at this college" is how I euphemistically put the lack of companionship in my college experience. My desire to transcend my personal history and emotional limitations has been nullified, and I am presently torn between sexual attraction to multiple females and meaningful co-existence with one woman. College life is not conducive to long-distance relationships. Consequently, I am ill prepared for what it is I am wishing for. I come to the relationship table with baggage. All of my unsolved and unanswered problems and questions stay packed up, and I expect these females to magically shed light on something they know nothing about—the deeper me.

With each encounter I either find out something new about myself, or I am reminded of some undesirable quality in my personality. In short, I am still searching for myself. I am afraid of being hurt again. My relationships with the opposite sex have left a stone in my heart. I have weathered self-induced loneliness because of my closed nature. And, through understanding, I have broken the stone in my heart. It's a healing process. I don't think that I will be able to have a meaningful and healthy relationship until I have rid myself of all of these smaller stones. Mistrust, fear, anger, and resentment must fade behind love for me to move on.

Even the longest journey begins with one step. Over the years the stride pace, and frequency of these steps have all changed. Now, twenty-two years later, my journey continues. I feel as if I have revealed as much about the journey as I have about the traveler. The words and stories I have shared highlight the most powerful memories I have of people and experience that helped determine my path in life. However, they are only fractions of my entire story. I have not mentioned my true friends who have been in

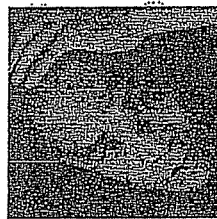
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surrogates family and support every step of the way. I am eternally grateful for having them in my life. Neither have I mentioned my involvement in student organizations, dance, my fraternity, or my academics. One can imagine the gamut of things I found to enhance my only-child existence. My search for a complete me is undying. The motivation it generates is eternal.

For my narrative to be complete, I need to know the full story for myself. So, I have begun to search for my father, who was my age when my mother conceived me. The thought that a man out there somewhere is the provider of half my genetic code, and that his presence in my life before the age of five has influenced my growth, sparks insurmountable curiosity. My search has begun with the help and support of my mother and my friends. I have no expectations, but whether I find him or not, the search itself can only further my journey of self-discovery.

EMERGING DIVERSITIES

Anthony Luckett earned a BA in engineering sciences/studio art and a BS in mechanical engineering from the Thayer School at Dartmouth College. After graduation, he volunteered as a teacher in the Marshall Islands, teaching elementary English (EFL), math, and science. In his second year in the central Pacific, he was the principal of the elementary school. Anthony currently lives in Boston and teaches high school math.



Johnny Lee No Such Thing ...

The church is an integral part of being Korean, at least in my family. Although I was born here in the United States, my immigrant parents have always taught my two siblings and me to see ourselves first as Korean, then as a child of God, and lastly as American.

"The *hayan* peoples, they are very different from Korea," my mother would always say. "We are not the same way as them. They think we are not equal either. We have to be the smarter, work harder, and pray to the *hwanin* every day so we can make it."

With Christianity playing such an integral role in my upbringing, internal conflicts quickly arose as soon as I hit puberty, which was when I realized that I was more interested in penises than vaginas. Afraid of eternal damnation, I tried for years to repress any and all thoughts of sex as much as I could. As a result, my early teen years were filled with guilt and shame over my inability to resist the "lure of Satan." In all of my misery, I spent a lot of time huddled in a closet praying to God in repentance for my bad thoughts. Back then I did not tell anyone what I was going through because I did not want to be seen as evil. I also genuinely felt that God would one day transform me into a "normal" person if I believed hard enough.

Right around the same time, I made a discovery that completely changed my life: online gay chat rooms. As a sexually inexperienced and depressed teenager, these chat rooms became my saving grace. It was the one thing that kept me sane through all my years of dating girls and contemporaneously masturbating to male underwear ads. Although these chat rooms only added to my contrition, they also became an amazingly refreshing release for me. For the first time I found a way to talk to other

people like myself. And best of all, the fear of being discovered was an issue because I was hidden behind a computer screen. Most of the titles I created in these chat rooms were fabrications, which gave me an excuse of never having to admit to myself that I was really gay.

During the course of my chat room addiction I met someone who will call Peter. Peter and I became immediate friends, and for about months we kept up with each other's lives, sent pictures back and forth, even gave each other birthday gifts. He admitted early on that he was great deal older than I was, which bothered me at first, but we managed to become close nonetheless because he made me feel comfortable about my sexuality.

Talking to him felt liberating and easy, because I no longer had to lie about my interest in men. I didn't have to alter the pronouns I used when referring to people I was attracted to, nor was I fearful of admitting to him that I liked gay porn, and that I felt sick to my stomach whenever women came too close to me. He was the first person I met who didn't feel that being gay was such a bad thing. Therefore, he became a welcome change from all the other straight friends I had in my life.

As time went on, Peter began to grow impatient with our anonymous friendship. Our conversations gradually began to end with talk of when we would see each other face to face. As much as part of me wanted to, I was not ready to take such a big step. Gay life was still a very frightening and evil thing in my eyes, and I did not want to surrender to it yet. Therefore, I shyly denied his request for several weeks. Keeping this arrangement was very difficult for me, because my craving for men grew more and more powerful. I wanted so badly to be touched, to have the strong arms of a man wrapped around me, and to feel his lips pressed against mine. My hunger for the male body was becoming uncontrollable. Yet I had absolutely no idea how to satisfy this need without feeling ashamed and without outing myself to my family.

Peter and I never spoke directly about being with each other, yet there was a subtle flirtation underlying every exchange we had. For instance, we always told each other whether we had masturbated that day. From what I could gather, I was almost certain that he wanted to sleep with me. As exciting as this prospect seemed, Peter's experience and age made me incredibly nervous. I was a clueless teenager with an enormous sex drive who knew nothing about how to satisfy someone. There was no doubt in my mind that I was too inadequate for him.

Worse than the fear of inadequacy was the constant anxiety I had of be-

ing caught by my parents. This had been a concern of mine for as long as I could remember. Therefore I went to great lengths throughout childhood to make myself as typically male as I knew how. Partly due to my efforts, and partly through their own denial, my mother and father managed to convince themselves for years that I was straight. For them to admit I was gay back then would have completely ruined the perfect image of our family they had tried to uphold in the face of God and the entire Korean community.

Life at home functioned under the watchful eyes of my insanely demanding mother. She raised my siblings and me under strict discipline and expected us to act appropriately at all times. We were taught at an early age that every action we made affected not only ourselves but all *haengjoks*. As Koreans, we were responsible for upholding the dignity of our people.

This meant doing well in everything and abiding by God's rules. Since my earliest memory, I can remember my mother telling me about her dreams for my life. When I was twelve, she was convinced that I would be the first Korean President of the United States or, more modestly, a highly esteemed medical doctor. As I grew older, the dreams only became bigger and more idealized. However, never did they include anything like homosexuality. Homosexuals were despicable in my mother's eyes. I knew this because she had often cracked bigoted jokes about the gay men who worked with her at her clothing company. She was the main reason why I had to resort to gay chat rooms and to secret friends like Peter whenever I needed attention.

Peter seemed to be the only ticket out of the repressed life I had been leading until then. Frustrated, sexually curious, and in desperate need of a man's affection, I therefore broke down and told him that I was interested in getting together. My sexual desires had become so insistent that I no longer cared about concealing myself. My only concern was in satisfying a need that had been unfulfilled for too long. Without giving another thought, I e-mailed Peter with my phone number, and in a matter of seconds the phone was ringing.

Peter lived in a small apartment complex in Lower Manhattan. I initially wanted to meet in a more public space like a coffee shop or a restaurant, but Peter complained that he had a lot of work to get done at home. Therefore, we made plans to meet for a while at his place, and then go out to eat after he was done. Although this made me feel a little uncomfortable, I figured that his excuse was a viable one, and that I had nothing to worry about. Strangely enough, Peter also added that instead of having me ring his

buzzer from the scoop of his building, I should wait across the street wearing a red shirt and jeans. He said that when he saw me from his rooms, he would come to the front door and prop it open so that I could slip inside unnoticed. I brusquely agreed to his request and left quickly for the subway.

As I sat impatiently waiting for the train to arrive at his stop, all I could think about was how it was going to feel to finally be with a man. My excitement was so great that it far overshadowed the worry I also felt in taking such a bold step for the first time. When I arrived at the front of his building, I allowed him to act out his mysterious ritual of letting me in. I stood on the street for about five minutes before finally hearing the door creak open slightly. My forehead began to sweat profusely as I slowly inched inside. Peter's apartment was dimly lit and music was playing softly in the background. The apartment was in slight disarray, but it looked as though he had tried tidying up while I was on my way over.

I gazed around the room and finally saw Peter standing in the corner. He was a tall, burly looking man with thick shoulders and no neck. His face was heavily scarred with remnants of acne, and he had a heavily receding hairline. Immediately, I realized that the pictures he had sent to me were obviously not of him. He looked a great deal older and chunkier than the blonde, blue-eyed athletic type he had fooled me into believing he would be. Upon looking at him, my first instinct was to leave. But for some reason, I didn't. Although this man was not who he said he was, he was a man nonetheless and that alone was oddly exciting.

As I walked inside, I told him that his dishonesty was making me feel uncomfortable, but he didn't respond. He simply kissed me, first on the forehead, then on my mouth. Next, he picked me up off the ground with his thick arms and proceeded toward the couch. I know I should have stopped him right then, but for some reason his bold act seemed unusually exciting. I became struck with an overwhelming sense of longing and fear, which rendered me immobile and mute. As idiotic as this must sound, perhaps you will be able to sympathize if you think back to those times when you felt like doing something bad, simply because you were sick of being right, sick of obedience and of always taking orders. I felt all of those things. My desires were boiling over, leaving me a pathetic fool. I didn't care about what the consequences were; all I wanted was to feel a man's touch.

As Peter laid me down on the sofa cushions, he slowly began rubbing his massive body up against mine. One of his hands held down both my arms, and the other was placed heavily on my chest. He straddled me

tightly, gripping both of his legs around my body so that I was pinned to the sofa like a wooden board. As he proceeded to gyrate and rub up against me, he suddenly put his hand around my neck and squeezed slightly. Immediately, I became frightened and wanted to stop what we were doing. I turned my head away from his kiss and asked him to get off of me. He responded in a rasp, "You're so beautiful, you're so fucking beautiful."

In a sudden panic, I tried to remove my arms, but this caused him to grip them even more tightly with both hands. When I began to roll around underneath him, he put the full force of his body weight onto my pelvis. I tried my best to squirm away from him, but he held me so firmly that my hips began to ache. At one point, I managed to free one of my hands and began pushing him away and screaming. But with one sudden motion, he grabbed my throat and squeezed firmly. With his other hand he gripped my arm so tightly with his nails that he pierced my skin. Blotches of blood began to appear on his couch. His massive body clasped onto me so tightly that it felt as though he could easily break me if I made a wrong move. When I stopped struggling with him, he began rubbing up against me, harder and more fanatically this time. I could feel his hard-on against my stomach. It felt like a weapon, ready to harm me at any moment. I was trapped and more frightened than I had ever been in my entire life. I could hardly believe what was happening.

There was a large mirror that hung over his sofa, and I remember looking at myself, thinking that I would be killed by this man if I didn't do something. But because I was so much smaller than he was, I was even more fearful of what he would do if I tried to stop him. I felt like screaming and yelling, but my immense fear silenced me. I managed to muster up enough courage to hit him once across the face, but he only became more forceful and even more excited. "So, little faggot boy likes to play rough?"

At one point, as he was nearing the peak of his excitement, he grabbed my red shirt and tore it down one of the seams. When I heard the sound of my shirt ripping, I broke. Tears started pouring down my face, and I began to sob hysterically. I thought my life was going to end right there in his apartment.

Surprisingly, hearing the sound of my crying made Peter turn extremely sympathetic. In an unexpected twist of fate, he stopped grabbing me and began wiping my tears and apologizing softly in my ear. His facial expression suddenly changed from one of extreme desire to immense guilt. Seeing this as my only opportunity to get out, I pushed him aside and ran out the door as fast as I could.

I tell you this personal story from my life not only for dramatic effect

but also because it represents one of the biggest turning points in my life. I realized that hiding my homosexuality from the world was only going to bring me grief. This also made me realize that I had to quickly come to terms with who I was. After this experience, I wanted so badly to run in to my parents' arms. But I couldn't. I couldn't tell anyone, because I was too afraid of what they would say after they found out how I had gotten into that situation. I knew that I could not go on lying forever to the people I love. I needed help. But I was deathly afraid of revealing the truth. This is the story of how I managed to stumble my way out of the closet and how I eventually succeeded in becoming myself.

Even at the early age of six, I was fully aware of the fact that I liked boys. Most kids that young are too busy playing with toys or eating glue to even realize they have genitalia. I, on the other hand, remember having my first erection while sharing a seesaw with a boy in the backyard of my school. At the time, I never connected my feelings with any larger picture. I certainly did not think of myself as gay. I merely thought that this was how I was and that my interest in girls would develop as I grew older.

My mother began to suspect that I was gay right around the time of my thirteenth birthday. A music teacher at school had tried to make a pass at me and after getting rattled on, he claimed that I was "the little faggot who flirted with him all semester." A few months following that incident, my mother caught my eyes lingering a bit too long on an underwear ad for men. From that point on, she began waking up occasionally at dawn to pray by my bedside and weep about her worries for my life. As this was going on, I had no choice but to pretend I didn't see what was going on. I was deathly afraid of telling my mother that her suspicions were correct. My mother also had no intention of speaking to me directly about this topic; therefore, we existed in denial until my first year of college. At this time, she was finally forced to face the truth.

During the summer after my freshman year at college, a friend of my father's had pulled a few strings and found a job for me at a lucrative law firm in DC. Unfortunately, the landlord of an apartment I had found in DC through a listing in a gay classified ad called my house to confirm I was taking the apartment. I was not home, and in the course of speaking with my mother, she determined that he was gay. That was all it took.

I came home at two in the morning that night, completely unaware of what had just occurred. When I walked into my room, I found my mother sitting on my bed with a Bible on her lap and used tissues scattered across

the floor beneath her feet. From the strained look in her eyes it appeared that she had been crying for quite some time. Confused, I asked her what was wrong and why she was upset. She didn't answer. During that brief moment of silence, as I looked at my mother sitting a few feet away from me, I suddenly realized what she was about to say. Perhaps it was the Bible or the strange expression on her face that gave it away. I don't know for sure. She looked down at the book in her lap and then up at me. Slowly words began to form in her mouth, and she finally asked, "Are you... the gay?" She spoke softly, but in a way that I knew not to answer her.

"For so many years, I try so hard. I try to raise you right way. I pray to God about this every day... e-very e--very day I pray so much about this. How can you do this? ... You embarrass us like this... you cannot be this way..."

I stopped her before she could finish. "What are you talking about?" I asked. "Why are you asking me this all of a sudden?"

"ARE YOU THE GAY?" she demanded. "Tell me! Answer me! Is my son the gay, the little fagboy wearing the tight clothes talk like grip?" She proceeded to prance around in a fit of anger, trying her best to mimic what to her was an accurate impersonation of all gay men.

"Umma, please. Please don't do this, Umma," I pleaded. "I'm tired, and I need to get some sleep. You look tired, too."

I looked into my mother's eyes, and I could see that she was not being rhetorical. This wasn't like past instances, when she had asked me in passing why I didn't have a girlfriend, or why I didn't like to play sports like my brother. This time, she needed an answer. My heart began to race as I quickly tried to come up with the best response for her. But before I could even think, she asked again, "ARE YOU THE GAY?"

I didn't know what I was thinking at the time. I'm not sure that I actually was. Without another moment of hesitation, I said, "Yes, Umma. Are you happy now? I am!" Tears began to flow down my face.

As soon as those words left my mouth, I became overwhelmed by a combined sense of relief from having shared this enormous secret and regret for allowing those words to escape from me. In a panic, I held my breath and wished that I could somehow press some kind of retrieval button so those words could slip back into my mouth before they reached my mother's ears. As I stood in front of her, I felt more exposed than I ever had before.

Her hands started trembling frantically as she slid slowly from the bed and onto my carpeted floor. Her eyes began to water and with all the

strength she could muster she whispered, "I don't believe . . . I don't believe. No such thing as the gay Korean. You are lying. There is no Korean gay. . . ."

At that moment, I knew that I had to make one of two choices. I could either tell her that she was right and that I was not really gay but only going through some problems, or I could speak honestly and tell her the truth. If I denied my homosexuality, I knew I would continue living a lie in front of my family and that I would have to go through the pain of pretending just for the sake of making my parents happy. If I spoke the truth, however, I knew that I would have to face severe consequences.

I hesitated and tried stalling simply by not responding and looking at the floor. Before long, my mother broke in and proceeded to say, "You cannot." In addition, she affirmed that I was not like those gay men she saw coming into her ladies clothing store, wearing makeup and speaking with androgynous voices and bent wrists. "It's impossible . . ."

My chance to liberate myself from the lies I had been telling all my life was quickly beginning to pass me by. I knew that if I didn't say something soon, I would lose the opportunity to reveal who I really was and would probably have to wait at least a few more years before the opportunity came up again.

Finally, I spoke and said, "Yes, I am gay. There is such a thing as a Korean gay person. I have always been gay, Umma. Now you know."

I will never forget the expression I saw on my mother's face after I spoke those words. A mixture of extreme anger, shock, sadness, and fear, condensed into her little eyes and in every little wrinkle on her face.

For the rest of that night, my mother and I spent hours crying and arguing with each other. She told me that I was not to move into that man's apartment anymore, and that I was going to live with Mr. Khim, the man who had gotten me the job at the firm.

"Why?" I asked. "Why can't I live where I want to live. I don't want to inconvenience Mr. Khim. And besides, he's probably going to think that I wasn't responsible enough to find my own place."

"No, you don't worry about that. I already call Mr. Khim. He knows that you are coming tomorrow. You cannot live with that bad man. He going to have sex with you and try to stick his penis in you. You cannot live with the gay. No, I will never let my son live in the gay house."

"Umma, not all gay people are bad. He won't do that."

"Yes! Yes they are all the bad! How do you know that they are not bad? Don't you know that God said so about the gay. God HATES the gay. They are all bad. They are all going to hell!"

My mother's opinions were made clear. She was not going to tolerate having a gay son, nor having a son live with someone who could corrupt him. In her final words, she stated that since I was going away to Washington, she would let the topic go for the time being, but as soon as I got back she would find a doctor for me and have me stay home for the fall term of next year so that I could "fix" myself. Although I disagreed with her wishes, I knew that it was not appropriate for me to argue with her any further. No matter what I said, she was not going to listen.

As she stood up from the floor to leave my room, she looked directly at me and said, "You have to pray to God. I will pray for you. But you have to pray, too, if you want to change. God will not punish us because he loves us. Don't worry, OK? If you pray, you will not think like this." She smiled, trying to look as encouraging as possible, and walked slowly back to her room.

A million things were rushing through my brain at once. All my life, I had been dreading this moment, and now it was finally here. What was going to happen next? I looked over at my packed bags and suddenly felt relieved that I was leaving tomorrow morning for DC.

For the next few hours, I slept soundly in my bed, perhaps because I was so exhausted from all the things that had just occurred. After just a few hours had gone by, however, I was awakened by my father whom I saw kneeling beside my bed. When he saw that I was finally awake, he grabbed a hold of my hands and nervously began to rub them in the awkward way he always does when he wants his children to know he cares. I asked him what was wrong, but before he could speak, he began sobbing.

That was only the second time I had ever seen my father cry. The first was at my grandfather's funeral, and even then, he had held back his tears until the very end when the coffin was being lowered into the ground.

I looked away from him quickly, realizing that my mother must have told him about the conversation she and I had a few hours ago. A sudden sense of fear began to consume me, because I had always been most afraid of how my father would react if he found out that I was gay.

He was, what most would call, the stereotypical Korean male. He came home from work every day, plopped himself in front of the television, turned on the sports channel, demanded his food, and was perfectly content for the rest of the night. Because of his seeming lack of interest in the family, he and my mother have always had a very rocky marriage that appeared close to ending on several occasions. Like most Korean fathers, he was stern, unemotional, and always kept his distance from his children so as to maintain our respect. He and I never really spoke all that much,

but it never bothered me because that was the type of relationship I was used to.

As he continued to rub my hands, he gently brushed the hair away from my face and said, "Johnny, I want you to know, I am not going to get mad like your mother." I looked at him, surprised at what he was saying.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly. Since I had spent my entire life never really sharing a deep conversation with him, I found myself at a loss for words. I could sense that both he and I had absolutely no idea how to express ourselves to each other.

"The reason I'm not going to get mad is because I know how you feel. I know what you going through."

Upon hearing those words, I automatically became defensive because I didn't want him to brush this off as a silly passing phase that I would be able to overcome as long as I listened to his advice. I had heard comments like this coming from my parents before, like back when I was having rough times at school and when my mother was trying to convince my brother and me to stop smoking.

"No. This isn't a dumb phase. You don't know how I feel. You can't possibly know," I said firmly.

"Yes. Yes I do, Johnny."

I tore my hands away from him, and I rolled over on my bed and faced away from him. "Go away, Abba!" I moaned.

"Just listen to me," he said. "Before I marry your mother, I never want to be with a woman. I was virgin before I meet her, and I was happy being with friend . . . like you. The reason I marry is only because I want a family. I want the children. You have to think that way, too. Please don't tell Urnna I say that, OK? Please."

As he gave his final plea, he quickly slipped out the door and left me alone in my room. I lay in bed completely still, aghast at what I had just heard. Was my father hinting at what I thought he was, or was I making an unfounded assumption? As I thought back to all the fights my parents had with each other, things began to take on a whole new meaning. Often times, months would go by when my mother would sleep on the floor in my room, and use the excuse that my father's snoring was keeping her awake. There were also instances when my father would stay up in my brother's room and play computer games until the late hours of the night, or come home at dawn and say that he was having drinks with his friends. Moment after moment began playing out in my mind, and I suddenly saw things so differently. Was my father homosexual or at least bisexual? If so, perhaps homosexuality was genetic after all.

I could hardly believe how quickly things were beginning to change for me. Within the last few hours, I had lost my apartment, gotten kicked out of the closet by a stranger, and now I had discovered that my father was possibly gay. The thought made me cringe, simply because I hated thinking about either of my parents in sexual terms. Strangely enough, I also began feeling angry with him, because I didn't think it was a fair thing to do to my mother. I promised myself that I would one day tell her what my father had confessed, just so she would know why her marriage was not working out. However, I have yet to gather enough courage to speak those words to her.

My parents insisted I stay with their friend in DC who had found the summer job for me. This was an awkward situation, and at one point he called my parents to tell them I was going to Vermont for the weekend. They immediately contacted me after work and asked whom I was planning on visiting. When I told them it was just a friend, they demanded that I give a name. I refused and said that they probably didn't know who the person was. Suddenly, my dad's voice overpowered that of my own and my mother's combined, and he said, "I KNOW who you are going to visit. You are going to visit Jonathan, aren't you?"

How did he know about Jonathan? He said that Jonathan's name appeared several times on the phone bill he had just received. I kicked myself, remembering how frequently I had called him during my brief time spent at home.

"Is he your boyfriend?" he asked in a loud tone. "I know he is."

My mother began to join in at this point, and the two of them probed over and over about whether or not I had a lover. After hesitating for a few seconds, I eventually answered, "Yes, yes, he is my boyfriend."

As soon as I spoke those words, my parents moved from being mildly upset to absolutely infuriated.

"I can't believe you," my mother yelled. "You are having sex, aren't you? You are sucking his dick, aren't you? You make me sick. How could you find a boyfriend?"

"Do you like dick up your ass?" my father added. "Should Urnna start picking out your wedding dress for you? My second child is a boy—he is not a girl. I don't want the faggot. I hate the faggot son."

Was I living in the damn "Twilight Zone"? His harsh words confused me. What had happened to his promise not to get as upset as my mother? Was he merely doing this to keep up appearances? It all seemed very strange to me.

I decided to visit Jonathan despite my parents' threats to discipline me. I did.

Jonathan and I had met several months ago at a gym where he was a step aerobics and spinning instructor. A friend of mine who was popular in one of his classes had urged me to meet him, because she knew both of us were looking for people to date. Just having entered college was eager to be introduced to new people, especially ones who were attractive and gay. So, I agreed to go along with her. When we finally got to the first time, however, there were no church bells or sirens going in either of us. As a Filipino American, he had never found other Asian men attractive. I held the same sentiment. But my attention was quickly diverted from his ethnicity to his strapping body. Previously, my disdain for dating Asian men had always been due to my preconceived notion that they are all scrawny or effeminate. Jon, however, was far from either of those things. He was the first Asian gay male I had ever met who was not only masculine but who had an amazingly chiseled body. His large pecs and defined arms, which were not covered by the tank top he was wearing, were an immediate turn-on for me. For Jon, a seven-year-age difference between us was an added reservation.

After dating for a short while, however, he and I took a liking to each other, and our worries seemed to no longer matter. We were both fairly experienced at sex; therefore, he did not have to spend any time teaching me or acting as my mentor. We developed an equal relationship, and no longer looked at each other along the lines of our age.

Jon picked me up from the airport and we made our way back to his house. To our surprise, three police cars were parked alongside the sidewalk in front of his home. As Jon slowly parked the car, we did not say a word. Both of us had a feeling that my parents had something to do with this. My heart began to race, and I swung my head in all directions to see if my parents were hiding somewhere behind the bushes.

"Your roommate called and told us about some threats made over the phone. Perhaps you should go inside and listen to them," said one of the police officers to Jonathan.

Jon and I walked toward his house, holding each other's hand. When we got inside, he immediately went for the answering machine. In red blinking letters, it indicated there were twenty-two messages.

The first one began to play and, as I had suspected, it was my mother: "Hellooo, this is Misesse Yoo calling for Jonathan Cruze. Please call me back; this is berry serious."

After a long beep, the next message began to play.

"This is Misesse Yoo again! Please! Please! I need talking with the you, Cruze. Please call me back! If you do not, then serious trouble!"

Message after message began to play, and I soon realized why Jon's roommate had called the police. The next few messages were from both my mother and my father, and they all said the same sort of thing. By the seventh message, things began to sound very strange.

"CALL US BACK! We have to talk! If you touch our son we going to KILL YOU! We will hire black killer to go to the house and KILL YOU! Watch out for us! We are coming there right now to the your house! Do not try to fucking touching our son—you FAGGOT GAY bastard!!!"

From that point on, the messages grew worse and more frightening. In the latter messages, my parents not only threatened Jon but also began threatening me. As I sat there with him, listening to my parents talk about murdering us, my knees began to shake violently and tears ran down my face. An uncontrollable feeling of despair came over me, and I shrank into a ball on the floor.

The policemen stood back, unsure what to do in a situation like ours. One officer walked over to Jon and patted him on the back. A female officer came over to where I was slumped and tried to console me by saying they had dealt with a situation like this before and it all worked out in the end. "All worked out," I thought to myself. Lady, you obviously don't know my parents at all.

"Do you want to press charges?" one officer asked. "I think that we have enough here to have your parents arrested, if that's what you want."

I looked at him in disbelief and said, "Of course not! They are my parents. I can't have them arrested."

After hearing my response, the officers looked at each other and decided that it was time for them to leave us alone. Before they left, they offered to have someone watch over the house, but I told them that it wasn't necessary, so with a quick thank you, all three of them left in their cars.

Jon stayed by the door and peered outside to make sure no one was creeping around behind the bushes. Meanwhile, I paced around the room biting my fingernails into nubs and sweating profusely.

I could tell by the expression on Jon's face and by the way he kept avoiding eye contact with me that he was angry. He had probably never expected to be thrust into this situation in such a dramatic way, yet it now seemed he was just as involved as I was. Although I knew he didn't blame me for what was going on, I felt incredibly guilty. Jon had done nothing wrong

and did not deserve to be in this situation, yet my crazed parents had somehow managed to drag him down with me. Being the nice guy that he was, he reached over, gently squeezed my shoulder, and forced a smile on my face.

I had always known that my parents were not going to be happy about the fact that I was gay. It was a fear I carried with me throughout my childhood. Even so, no matter how much I was aware of my parents' hatred of gays, I never truly believed they would respond so harshly. After all, it was their son. Part of me thought that after living in America for so long, they would grow accustomed to the idea that being gay wasn't a bad thing. I was quickly discovering my assumption was very wrong.

Jon and I felt like sitting ducks. Although we were five hours away from my home in New York, we both knew that my parents were crazy enough to take the long trip up to Vermont to collect their son and to give him a good reprimand. What else they would do to him was what we were both afraid of.

What had I done wrong? As this question kept repeating in my mind, rage began to build inside me as I realized over and over again that the answer was nothing. I had done nothing to deserve this treatment from them. I couldn't take it anymore. I walked over to the phone and dialed home with determination. As it began to ring, however, I hoped that my mother would not be the one to pick it up.

"Hello . . . ? Hello?" It was my brother.

"Kennedy, thank God it's you." My voice began to tremble, and I was still out of breath from having cried for such a long time.

"Johnny, what the fuck is going on? Are you all right? Calm the hell down. Breathe . . . I can hardly understand you," my brother barked.

Before I could answer, his voice suddenly turned into a hushed whisper, and I could hear the creaking of the floor as he rushed to get as far away from my parents as possible.

"Where are you right now? Are you with that guy? Please tell me you're not at his house." I paused, wondering how he knew about Jon. I suddenly realized that my parents must have told him about my secret. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me that they would actually take the liberty of telling my siblings that I was gay. Of course; this would have been consistent with how things normally go in my family. Most of the time, there are never any secrets kept among us. Whenever something happens to one person, everyone somehow finds out about it. For instance, when my sister had gotten her first period, my mother announced it to all of us a few

minutes after my sister had just finished telling her how embarrassed she was. We were all raised to believe that no secret was too big to be kept from family. Nevertheless, I had still hoped that something as big as this would be kept private and that my parents would give me the opportunity to come out to my brother and sister on my own.

"Yes, you mean Jon . . . He is here with me now." My voice stammered and there was a brief moment of silence. I wasn't sure what my brother was thinking. I wanted him to laugh and tell me he supported whatever I decided to do, but I knew that hearing this news was very hard for him to deal with. I had been almost as afraid of coming out to my brother as I was with coming out to my parents. Growing up, he had clearly expressed his dislike of gays on several occasions, joking crassly with his friends about fags, gots, and dykes and mocking any gay he knew who had the slightest effeminate mannerism. Along with my parents, he too had suspected that I was queer for a very long time. But like most people, he didn't want to accuse his younger brother of something he felt was so despicable and worthy of mockery. Not knowing what to say, I shyly asked, "So, what do you think about all this?"

"I don't fucking know. Urgh . . . she says you're gay. Whatever. I don't want to talk about it now." His answer was as I had expected. Like my father, Kenny never liked to talk about anything more meaningful than who should win the next World Series or what he should eat for dinner. He quickly tried to change the subject. "I'm gonna get in a lot of shit if they pick up the phone, you know that?"

"I know, I know. I just had to call to see what was going on. I want to know if . . ." I was suddenly interrupted by the sound of my mother's voice in the background.

I held the receiver close against my ear and listened as intently as I could for a response, a question, or even a noise from my mother that would indicate what she was thinking at that moment.

"Does she look pissed?" I asked nervously. Hearing this question said aloud made me wonder why I was suddenly so scared of my own mother. This was someone who had raised me, whom I was supposed to love and who was supposed to love me in return.

Five days went by before I finally returned home to face my parents. When I walked through the door, my entire family was seated together in the living room. My mother and father sat next to each other and both had stern expressions on their faces. For the first few minutes, a silence fell over

the room that was so thick with tension that even my brother couldn't help but squirm around in his seat. Finally my mother looked toward me and said, "Johnny-ya, Abbah and I decided that no more yelling anymore. No point. We want you to go see a special doctor. You have to be cured right away. They have to fix—we cannot fix. We have to help you. . . . God will help you, too."

"What, a special doctor? You mean a psychologist?"

My brother suddenly broke in. "No, she means a psychiatrist. She knows someone who can help you, I think. We all feel that you should do this, too."

I looked at my brother and sister and couldn't believe they actually bought into my parents' bogus plan. How could they think this was a good idea? Why were they siding with my parents?

"Are you guys all crazy? I am gay. You've all known that for a long time, you just never wanted to accept it. This is the way I am, this is how I will always be. You're just going to waste money trying to fix me. I just don't like girls, God, can't you understand that? Girls do nothing for me. In fact, they make me sick. How do you expect me one day all of a sudden to wake up and go from liking dick to pussy?"

"Don't worry about money. I will take care of everything," my father said, trying to interrupt me before I went any further.

"Nothing is going to happen. This is who I am, I can't help that."

My brother spoke up once more. "How the hell do you know? You never know what could happen. I am not a freakin' expert, but neither are you. Don't be so damn closed-minded. If you had even the slightest chance to change, wouldn't you want to take it? It would make life so much easier for you. This is fucking the smarter thing to do."

The conversation went on for three more hours, without the slightest hint of resolution. I tried my best to convince my family not to send me to a shrink, because I just knew that my visits would amount to nothing more than a big hole dug deep into my parents' pocket. Unfortunately, my family remained firm in their opinions, despite my constant attempts to dissuade them.

I ended up visiting three different "specialists" that summer. The first person I went to told me after the second session that she was not going to try and change who I was but that the purpose of my visits would be to help me cope with the trauma of coming out to my parents. The following day, however, I learned from my sister that the doctor had called my mother as

soon as I had left her office and told her over speakerphone that she thought I was curable. She also added that she really didn't think that I was gay, but that I was only rebelling against my parents' wishes for attention. Her comments single-handedly made my situation at home immensely worse than it was before because, instead of dissuading my mother, this doctor had confirmed all of my mother's deluded suspicions and made her more convinced that I was only going through a problem stage. After hearing what she had said, I refused to see her again because I was afraid I would lunge at her from the across the desk and rip her hair out for lying to my parents.

The second person I went to was a small, chubby Korean man who specialized in family counseling. The only advice he was able to give me was that people can change.

"You are too young to make any clear-cut distinctions about yourself. Everyone changes. For instance, one day you may love vanilla ice cream, and the next day you will hate it. In the same way, you may think you like men today, but it can very well change tomorrow. That's the beauty of life, the beauty of being human."

After three more visits with him I felt I had wasted enough of my time, so I told my parents that I no longer wanted to go. Before they agreed, however, they joined me for one session and found out for themselves just how incompetent he was. During the meeting, my parents and I got into an argument that became so intense we almost broke the furniture in his office. The psychiatrist was so clueless as to how to moderate the situation that he simply left the room until we finally decided to leave as well.

The last specialist was a man in whom my parents had placed the most hope. Our pastor had recommended him to us, because he was not only a psychiatrist, he was also a Christian pastor himself. Assuming that he would automatically be anti-gay, my mother eagerly set an appointment for me to meet with him and even skipped a day of work to come along.

His office was on the top floor of a large building in midtown Manhattan. When my mother and I walked inside, I was surprised to find that he was not Korean. He stood about six feet tall and had slicked back white hair. At the start of our session, he first asked me to explain what was going on, and why I was brought to him. I explained, as best I could, all the events that had gone on that summer. When I finished speaking, he then asked my mother to describe my story from her point of view.

"Well, Pastor Richards, I know my son, and he says he is the gay. But I really do not think he is the gay. The gay men do not look like him. I need

you fixing him please. To change him. God is not happy. He hates the you know that too, right, Pastor Richards?"

When my mother finished with her explanation, Mr. Richards then getting ready to scold me. Resigned, I sat back and waited for him to me how wrong I was and how I could change as long as I prayed hard enough or read the Bible. But surprisingly, when he gave his assessment instead of offering a cure for my homosexuality, he completely sided with me and began reprimanding my mother for treating me so harshly. His response was so unexpected that it didn't hit my mother until much later that he was actually disagreeing with her. At first, she simply nodded her head at every comment he was making, thinking that he was giving me advice on how to be straight.

"I am a pastor. I have been one for thirty-five years of my life. I don't know why God would create gays and also say that being gay is wrong. Perhaps no one will ever know. But we have no right to judge or say that this lifestyle is wrong. This is not your son's fault. In all honesty, Mrs. Lee, your actions repulse me. You should be ashamed of yourself."

I was in complete disbelief at what he was saying. I had expected to hear more of the same old rhetoric from him about changing myself but he was actually very supportive. My mother became completely silent. As I looked at her sitting in her chair, red with guilt, I suddenly felt a sense of hope for the first time.

When the session ended, my mother left the office in a hurry, with the excuse that she had to get back to work. Later that day, she spoke to me briefly and tried to convince me as to why Mr. Richards was not a capable psychiatrist. She came to the conclusion that I would no longer see him, because "He looked like bad man, and he probably the gay."

That was the last attempt my parents made to seek professional help for me that summer. This was mostly due to their costly expenditure of more than two thousand dollars in fees, which gained them nothing. After having gone to these "special doctors," my outlook on our society became decidedly more grim, and I felt more disillusioned than I ever had before. Although the last person I visited was in support of me, the others were clear indications that there was still a great deal of ignorance and homophobia in existence, even among educated tiers of our society. Before this time, I never thought legitimate psychiatrists in the United States would feel that homosexuality was something to be changed. It seemed so ludicrous to me. I looked at Jon and all my other gay friends and wondered

how anyone could ever think they were sick or needed help. Who comes up with these rules?

Two more incidents occurred that summer, which forever changed the way I viewed my family and the relationships I had once felt were so vital to my life. These events both involved arguments with my mother and father, respectively. The first involved a scenario in which my mother believed, I convinced I "had the devil in me" and attempted a spontaneous exorcism that led to her trying to prevent me from leaving and wound up with her tackling me, causing a serious cut to my foot and sending me to the emergency room.

A week later, my father and I had an argument that ended with me punching him in the face. Before this time, I had never hit anyone before; I couldn't even comprehend it. But after his fifth attempt in one week to "beat the gay out of me," he left me with no other choice. When the fight ended, I was not the only one left severely bruised. My mother tried to protect me from my father's wrath and ended up getting herself battered by him as well. My father locked himself away in his room, treating the small cuts he received from having fallen into a glass coffee table after I punched him square in the chin.

His final words to me were to forbid me from ever returning home again. "Do whatever you want," he said. "Get the AIDS. Just don't come to me. You are no longer my son. You shame us."

That night, I packed up my belongings as quickly as I could and had my brother drive me back to Jonathan's house in Vermont. This final episode had broken me and made me realize there was no use in fighting anymore. After leaving home, more than four months passed before I was able to speak to my parents again.

Recently, I bumped into a friend from high school whom I hadn't seen since graduation. His father was a close childhood friend of my mother's and had immigrated with my parents around the time of the large influx of Koreans in the late seventies. Since we had not seen each other for years, we spent the evening talking about what was new in our lives. When he asked how my family was doing, I told him about coming out to my parents and how difficult it had been. Based on the reactions of all of my other friends, I had expected that he too would be appalled by my story. However, instead of reacting in shock, he actually sympathized with my parents' point of view. None of the details of that summer were surprising to him. In fact, he even attempted to rationalize their behavior. "You have to see things from their perspective," he said. Interestingly enough, after hear

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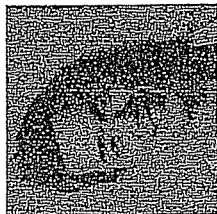
ing his response, I began to notice similar ones from my other Korean friends. They have all been unexpectedly understanding of the way my parents reacted that summer. As much as I hate to generalize, it is almost impossible to ignore the glaring conclusion that this trend points to.

Korean society, as many will tell you, is generally not accepting of gays. It's a fact I have grown to understand and live with. However, I do not tell my story to have Korean culture criticized as backward and antiquated. Even through all the sadness, I never once damned my parents, nor my Koreaness. If that is what you thought I was getting at, then you have missed the point. No one should fool themselves into thinking that the United States is a great deal more sympathetic to the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual) cause than are my parents. If that were the case, then there would be fewer "closet-cases" and Matthew Shepard incidents in this country. It is very easy, as an outside observer, to react with amazement and anger at what my parents have done. It is even easier to brush my story off as a tale about a dysfunctional Korean family. Before you take this route, however, it is perhaps necessary to ask yourself this: What would happen if I were your son/daughter, brother/sister, cousin ... and came out as gay? Would it be so unreasonable to think that you or your family members would respond in the same way as mine did? Although this is only a guess, I am assuming there are only a handful of families who would genuinely be unaffected by it and even supportive. Having a gay relative would make no difference whatsoever! To those who do not judge, I applaud you. But to those large numbers of you who would be bothered, the only thing I have left to ask is why? What is it exactly you fear?

Today, as I stand on the threshold of my twenty-first birthday, I look back at the events of that summer and realize that my life will never be the same. Sadly, after all that has been said—the threats, and the insults—I find it difficult to feel the same love I once felt for my mother and father. It is impossible to take any of it back. Although I consider each new day a time to forget, I know there will always be scars. My parents are still far from reaching the point of accepting my homosexuality. In a way, I think they never will. My mother still asks me when I will bring home a girlfriend nearly every chance she gets. She is bothered by the distance I have kept from her since then and is now trying to have fewer confrontations with me. My father, surprisingly, has become more understanding and is frequently the one to quiet my mother when she begins to argue with me about how I am living my life; however, the lack of communication between us has grown acutely worse. I doubt there will ever be a time when

I can speak freely to him about my new boyfriend I acquire. And as much as I would like to ask him about that morning when he tried to communicate to me, I do not think I will ever be able to. But my life is not unlike anyone else's. We all exist with scars that seem too deep and too painful. I guess that is the one thing I have come to learn from my coming-out experience.

Since graduation from Dartmouth College, Johnny Lee has worked as a marketing manager for a jewelry designer and lives in a "fabulously small, yet amazingly expensive, apartment" back home in New York City. His parents and he maintain a relationship; however, their interactions are limited. He is hopeful that over the years the relationship will improve.



him, "Why can't we connect on a more authentic level? Why can't we talk openly about things that really matter for a change? Why won't you just pay me some goddamn attention?!" At that point I was certain this was not just a theatrical performance but rather that the whole play itself, all the preparation and all the character development, had been rooted somewhere in my own personal experience. This performance was a rehearsal for my own life, and now it was time for my father to finally take his first step into it.

Early in the summer after my freshman year of college, I had decided to participate in a week-long "Theater of the Oppressed" (T.O.) workshop. As an interactive participatory style of theater used to create social change, T.O. draws its themes and ideas from the performance group's collective stories of oppression, conflict, or struggle. From a large group of more than forty participants we split up into five smaller focus groups, and I chose to be part of a focus group specifically addressing homophobia. Together in a group of six people we shared personal stories in which we had encountered homophobia and created a single-act play that incorporated personal struggles from our collective experiences.

Although the story was not based directly on my experience as an ambivalent twenty-one-year-old Chinese Canadian still exploring my sexual orientation, I willingly offered to play the role of the protagonist, a gay male fifteen-year-old, who endures a painfully rejecting coming-out experience with his peer group, and who later returns home to have the experience further aggravated by a complete rejection by his parents. I knew that in many ways the young man's struggles to gain acceptance, recognition, and attention from his peer group were no doubt experiences that paralleled my own life, and I knew I wanted to be able to explore dimensions of my own relationships: the fears, the voices, and the internal monologues, through my character, Derek. I also found that the struggles Derek faced in his life, particularly in the relationship with his parents (most particularly with his father), resonated with my own struggles to develop a positive identity as a Chinese male confronting, wrestling with, and coming to terms with many of the traditional values and limited definitions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and masculinity that my father had modeled.

Through the story itself was outlined, in many ways the unscripted, improvisational format of the play allowed me to develop Derek's character based on my own lived experiences and relationship with my parents. As soon as we started rehearsing I began to feel ownership of the play, an through every quirk, every gesture, every movement in every limb, the plot

Vincent Ng: Farewell My Lung-Tew

"Would you put down the dishes and just fucking listen to me!!!"

"Well . . . all right then, Derek. What is it? We're listening," Mother responded in an agitated tone with more than just a hint of impatience. . . . Silence. . . . I took one long hard swallow and made the best effort I could to articulate myself as clearly as possible, even as I felt my body tensing up, my heartbeat pounding with anxiety, and my eyes on the brink of watering. "I'm gay . . ."

There was another long, drawn-out silence. I could feel the shock setting in—my mother desperately searching for words on which to grasp for emotional stability. After a few painful seconds her gaze clawed its way over to Howard. My eyes also shifted at that moment toward my father. They immediately became fixated on him with a longing, desperate plea for help, for support, for acceptance. In the background I could hear mother as she gasped and in a panic-stricken tone said, "Howard, don't just stand there. . . . Call the doctor, will you?"

Father held his position for just a few seconds before the tension was too much for even him to hold on to, and as he turned away from me, I felt as if he were discounting the only son he had ever had—completely and utterly rejected.

At that point I disengaged my gaze from him and directed all my energy away. My stare immediately became focused instead on a five-foot-eight-inch, slim, Chinese man in his late fifties sitting in the last seat in the second row—my real father as he sat watching the play. Through my eyes I told my father of my own pain, the very same feelings of isolation and abandonment, which I hoped filled him with remorse. In my mind I begged of

came after me, intertwined with the innermost thoughts and hidden emotions in my character: the suppressed anger and rage as a result of not being heard, the burden of shame for not having lived up to my father's expectations of an ideal son, and the yearning for a true connection rooted in a genuine relationship.

Later that evening, I followed up the performance by initiating a discussion with my father—one unlike any we had ever had before. I pulled out the sbeid in the guest house we were staying at, and as I lay down next to him, I dropped up on my side, with a hint of curiosity in my voice I casually addressed him, "So, Dad, what did you think of the play tonight?"

The evening had created the ideal situation to have this conversation with him—there was nowhere to leave to, and the play had served as a convenient induction into a dialogue on sexuality. I purposefully decided not to tell him whether I identified with a particular sexual orientation, nor that I was exploring my own sexuality, but rather decided to see where his own assumptions about my desire to talk would lead the conversation. Would he assume it was an indirect way of telling him I was gay? If so, I could change his homophobia. Part of me felt very safe, since many of the emotions and fears around rejection, abandonment, and shame had already been laid out on the table during the performance, and I purposefully phrased my questions from the perspective of the characters, as I tactfully asked him, "How do you think the father in the play felt when his son came out?"

He waited for a moment. I noticed as he uneasily shifted, crossed his arms across his chest as he lay, and stared blankly at the ceiling.

"Well . . . man and a man are just not meant to reproduce. It is biologically unhealthy," he answered, simply reciting his way through the same arguments on homosexuality that he had always cited. After prodding him fiercer with my persistent line of questioning, however, it suddenly became apparent to me where his own fears really lay. "Well . . . you know it would really be a disgrace to the Ng family name—to have a gay son that is."

He then proceeded to tell me stories about the black sheep in the family: distant relatives who had fallen victim to alcoholism and gambling in Hong Kong; curiosity was piqued, as I keenly wanted to know more about his relationship with his father and the values that had been instilled in him grow up.

"So, Dad, do you ever do anything that your father wasn't proud of?" I asked.

"No, . . ." he said, then paused for a few seconds; his eyes again shifted uneasily. "Well, . . . just this one time . . . I was climbing on the rooftops of our apartment back in Hong Kong. I was quite a naughty boy back then, I'll tell you. My father told me never to climb on the rooftops and one day he caught me."

"What did he do then?"

"Well . . . *tung-tew* of course!" *Tung-tew* was a Chinese feather duster used for corporal punishment. "And he really hit me that time, I'll tell you."

"Where did he hit you?"

" . . . on the legs. The back of the legs."

"And what did he say?" I looked directly into his eyes, and I could see them begin to water as he choked on his words.

" . . . it's better I break your leg with this *tung-tew* than have you fall off the rooftop and break your own leg, you stupid boy!"

My body froze in numb shock. I felt devoid of feeling, wanting to console, to reach out, to support my father; yet all I could do was sit there. . . . I had no words to say. All I could do was imagine being him. . . . and how horrendous it would have been to have had my own father say that to me. The pain I felt made me feel like my body had shriveled down to the size of a walnut. My body was gripped by anger as tears started to come to my eyes. It's no wonder he blames himself for getting beaten even to this day.

For a split second, I could not help but see him as an amazing survivor. He was one who made it through growing up in a physically abusive family environment with a non-present father. He was someone who genuinely tried to give his own children a better life, yet still felt the pain that dwelled deep down inside him, I began to see how the patterns of coping through physical abuse had been passed down through the generations; his parenting styles had been learned through his own destructive role models. Now I realized why, when I was ten years old and had slipped and fallen down the stairs at home, his response had been to yell and swear at me. "You see! *Tew!* (Fuck!) I should give you the *tung-tew* for falling down those stairs since I told you not to run in socks. *Ma-hai-yung-a-ley!* (Fuckin' useless!)"

I had sat at the bottom of the stairs crying as my mother held me in her arms and embraced me without saying a word, protecting me from her abuse. My mother has always been there for me. I feel it is through her that I have learned genuine empathy. She has always been the one who has encouraged me to pursue new programs, to greet challenges and new ide

with an open mind. Through my mother I have learned to reject traditional sexist gender roles and to embrace a broader definition of masculinity. It would be easy to assume that simply because she was my mother she naturally possessed a maternal instinct to provide unconditional love in all situations; yet, as I began to learn more about my mother and father's history and their family relationships growing up, I really began to see and understand where it was that I came from.

From a poor farming family, my mother had grown up with loving parents and strong female role models—namely her grandmother, who was particularly radical for her time. As an adolescent, she had rejected the Chinese tradition of foot binding and had run away from home to lead her own life. My father, in contrast, had grown up around an abusive, diabetic, gambling-addicted father who died a slow, bitter death. I could see how we had both been shaped by the practice of shaming as it had been meted out to my father and passed along to me as a young boy. I began to see myself as a generational product of a historical lineage of fatherlessness, and I had vowed to myself that I would not subject my own children to the same painful pattern of absenteeism.

I could see the loneliness that he felt in his life at times. I could see how his style of parenting made it difficult for my younger sister and me to relate to him on a personal level. I could see how the unhealed pain from his relationship with his father had become the recycled content for his role as an oppressive male in his relationship with my mother. I longed for openness in our relationship, yet I instead received a very limited definition of masculinity that excluded vulnerability. It occurred to me that my father was never taught and as a result did not understand or value the role of emotional literacy in human development. Perhaps this explains why I have never felt comfortable disclosing personal thoughts, talking about sexuality and relationships, or sharing my true hopes, fears, and aspirations with him. Instead, with my father, I learned to fear judgment, rejection, and shame.

The night of the one-act play my father witnessed the performance of my life. I had never felt so in touch both in a physical and an emotional sense with a character I played—particularly in the scene where I broke down emotionally and had to yell at the top of my lungs to get my father's attention. I needed him to hear how much he had hurt me in the past. I needed him to hear how frustrating it was to live my life always feeling like I had never met his expectations. It felt as if he never wanted to listen—perhaps because he himself had never been heard. After all, it's much eas-

ier to run away from one's problems. Unfortunately, however, there were times when running away was not even an option for him, and I soon learned that rage had an alternative outlet: violence.

I can still clearly picture that night. I was fifteen years old; we were driving home down a highway and an argument had erupted between my parents. I remember that it became heated very quickly, and the next thing I knew my father picked up a cellular phone battery in the front of the car, turned around, and threw it at my mother's head.

My mother burst out screaming, "Stop the car! I'm getting out!" And before I knew what was going on, we had swerved over to the shoulder of the road and screeched to a stop.

My father yelled back, "*Tew-ley-to-mai!* (Fuck your mother!) Get out!" And my mother scrambled out of the car slamming the door behind her as she bolted out on to the highway into the darkness. I remember breaking out in a panic that a car might hit her; I watched clinging to the edge of my seat as she flailed her arms in the air dashing out in front of the headlights of an oncoming car. It stopped, and within a split second she had climbed in and was whisked off down the highway in the other direction. My thoughts scattered like an ice cube tossed into a blender, splintering in all directions. "Where the hell is Mom going?!" I screamed in silence. My father waited for what felt like an eternity, though it was probably only a few minutes before he pulled back on to the highway and drove home. It was a silent ride, and I recall walking into the house feeling empty inside, utterly lost as I tried to hide in isolation in my room. About an hour later I heard a knock at the door, and when I answered it, to my surprise I encountered two policemen.

"Would you mind if we just had a quick word with your father," one calmly asked. Anxiously, I went to fetch my father, then waited as he stepped outside and they closed the door behind them. Lifting myself up by the fingertips to peer out the high kitchen window, I watched with horror as the two policemen handcuffed him and pushed my suddenly limp father into the back of the police car without mentioning even a word to me. I felt the blood drain from my legs and a lonely pale fright overcame me as I collapsed into a crouched ball on the floor. . . . my father didn't even look back at me. I sank to the ground as my sister came up to me a few minutes later wiping the tears from her eyes as she sat down on the chair next to me and through tears and sobs begged me to tell her where they were taking my father.

"I don't know!" I abruptly spat back. Void of answers and not knowing

what to do, I wrestled with the frustration of being expected to know what was going on. A creeping feeling of being completely alone caressed my body, as I sat there, helpless, trying to calm both myself and my sister through the night—until my mother returned several hours later, tired and emotionally exhausted. My father was released the following day, but reconciliation efforts were made, and still to this day he blames my mother for everything that happened.

I had to come to terms with not only my father's emotional distance and occasional violence but his demands with respect to living up to traditional Chinese values as well. Growing up, I always had odd notions of what exactly it meant to be Chinese. To me, the notion of being *Chinese* encompassed everything bad about living with my father. Images of him sweating at my sister and me and threatening to punish us with the *ting-tzu* crop come readily to mind. When I was thirteen years old he implemented a "speak Chinese only" policy at home, yet both my sister and I refused to speak Chinese. In fact, it was nearly impossible for us to communicate in Chinese having grown up with English around the home and having gone to international private schools where the majority of our friends were white expatriates' children from the United Kingdom or Australia. Our father assumed that the Chinese language was somehow automatically programmed into us—in a sense he made the classic immigrant mistake of assuming that his kids would retain all of their "heritage," including language, even after he and my mother had decided to put us through a Western educational system.

To me, *Chinese* was Nick Cheng, the dorky kid with glasses who spoke with an accent, whom we never let play soccer with us. *Chinese* was going on a trip to our ancestral village in China when I was thirteen years old to pay respects to our ancestral graves and having all the villagers—even the men in the restaurants—make fun of me because they thought I was a girl because I had long hair. *Chinese* was sitting in a loud, crowded dim sum restaurant with old distant relatives whose company I dreaded because I couldn't communicate with them, and I regularly suffered their ridiculing comments criticizing the Chinese boy who couldn't even speak his own language. In fact, I hated the language. Most of the time I heard it spoken was either when my parents were arguing or when it was forced on me by a bitter, unresponsive, old Mandarin teacher in elementary school who was overly critical about our pronunciation. In general, I tried to dissociate myself from most things that appeared to be Chinese—after all, I just wanted to fit in with my white friends.

The first time I became consciously aware of needing to fit in was when we relocated to Canada in anticipation of the fragile political situation surrounding the British colonial handover of Hong Kong. It was during high school that I can first recollect that race was made a salient issue to me. We had moved to Toronto, Ontario, which has a fairly large Asian population—mainly recent immigrants from Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan. I attended an elite all-boys private school that was probably 40 percent Asian, 40 percent white, and 20 percent other minorities. I remember sitting in French class during the first week having a conversation with a Canadian-born Chinese guy.

"Oh, you're a Honger, eh? Yeah, one of those F.O.B.s," he snickered.

"What do you mean, F.O.B.?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, Fresh Off the Boat," he answered gloating with a wry smile. I did not know how to respond. Part of me was shocked, part of me was offended, and part of me was somewhat anxious. I was from Hong Kong—yes, that was true—but I certainly did not arrive on a boat. Part of me was thinking, is this really someone whom I want to associate with? But another part of me was also thinking, well, if he knows a bunch of white kids, and I don't really want to become associated with the "F.O.B. Hongers," then perhaps he might be someone I want to get to know. I would soon come to understand that F.O.B. and Honger were derogatory racial slurs laden with all the negative Asian stereotypes of speaking with an accent, being a nerd, unathletic, and smelly, having no Western manners; and bringing stinky Chinese-sausage fried rice to school in your lunch box and being scared to eat lunch in a public place where people might be offended by its odor. Being a Honger meant having no confidence, interpersonal skills, or leadership abilities. And though I would never admit it to myself in high school, it was also about being asexual or sexually invisible.

I found myself having to fight hard against all of these cultural stereotypes. I was not a computer geek; I was not a violin prodigy; and I did not wear glasses (and for the longest time refused to get glasses even though I needed them). Yet, as much as I distanced myself and tried desperately to define myself in opposition to these cultural stereotypes, in frustration still found myself bound to them. Matters of sexual attraction did not escape my stereotyping; I had always been physically attracted to white girls. Until I was fifteen, I had never found Asian girls the least bit sexually appealing; for some reason, all of my preadolescent and early adolescent crushes were on white girls. I guess somewhere in the back of my mind

had a small Asian man, white trophy girlfriend complex: that if I could date a white girl, well, hell, that would prove that I was white—or at least not a Honger. Ingrained in my psyche was the idea that all Asian girls were boring, dull, and demure, and subconsciously, I had bought into the dominant popular culture definition of female beauty: I wanted Barbie, someone who had unrealistically big breasts, a thin waist, and blonde hair.

By sophomore year, however, my racial readings had to be adjusted. I started attending the boarding school program, and in this new environment about 80 percent of the students were Hongers. My roommate, Tommy Wu, was from Taiwan, and my two suitmates were from Hong Kong. I quickly found out that I really enjoyed the company of all of them, and we ended up bonding over cooking midnight snacks of rice, noodles, and *dan-dan-see-lang-yu* (Chinese canned fish). I realized the stupid small things we did together captured an element of nostalgia that brought me back to home in Hong Kong. Indulging in the familiar foods and the smells, I felt comfortable not having to hide my customs and cultural practices. We would play pool together after school, and during our pickup basketball games, I would even joke around by throwing out random obscene Chinese slang words—*jo-mui-tee-yeab-ah-ley*—as my friends would smile and laugh at my pronunciation. Undoubtedly, they appreciated my making the effort to relate through Cantonese.

Back at school during the day, however, I acted as if I barely even knew them. They became the confidentially filed friendships in my secret drawer, only to be opened at night when no one was looking, since there was no way that among my white friends I could be seen to be friends with Hongers. Consequently, it was hard for me to make friends with recent immigrant Asians and maintain those close friendships, and it was also hard for me to ground myself in a strong Asian identity.

Barely aware of my own ethnicity, I drew my closest four male friendships from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. During elementary and middle school, my best friend was a tall, inverted British guy named Jim. In high school, my best friend was a tall, spunky, Chinese-born Canadian called Graham. Though I would describe my best friendships as close, they were primarily activity-based and fairly competitive in nature, and it was rare that we would connect through personal sharing or feel comfortable discussing whom we had crushes on or our relationships. My close peer group in high school was fairly diverse along ethnic lines, activities, and interests: we were two Asians, two white guys, and a brown guy, and since we were so hard to categorize we avoided any reputation branding.

As a group, we entered the dating scene late, and it was not until senior year that we began to consistently socialize with a group of girls. I never really felt the pressure to start dating, let alone pursue any sexual exploration, until late senior year, and as a result I entered college not having had any experience with a long-term romantic relationship or with sex. Furthermore, I had never had anyone whom I could talk to openly about sexuality. It seemed far too awkward and shameful to do so with my parents, and my sister seemed too young and immature. But in fact, this changed when I went to college and my sister started dating before I did. Then, it was not my multiracial friends to whom I turned to talk about girls, but instead to my sister. Chelsea gradually became the knowledgeable one when it came to romantic relationships; thus she was no longer just a little sister but someone I could go to for advice, and my own maturing views on gender roles allowed me to begin to see her as an equal. Slowly, we began to open up and share more personal and cultural tenther bonded by making light jokes about the generational and cultural tensions in our relationships with our parents. Most important, however, we began to provide emotional support for each other at times when our parents would engage in heated arguments, and I have now come to view her in many ways as my best friend.

My concerns about my race and the absence of any romantic or sexual relationships even of the most fleeting kind had somehow remained tacit throughout high school; yet they were forced into the open upon my arrival in college. I was confronted with a barrage of sexual stimuli, a multitude of attitudes toward sexuality and experimentation, opportunities for dialogue on race issues, and liberal, avant-garde teachers. The deeper friendships I began to form led to more honest self-disclosure, and I really began to question what it meant to be both a Chinese Canadian male and a sexual being. It became legitimate to express my feelings through actor and find out where my sexuality lay, since I had come out of my high school years unclear. College thus allowed me to come into my own, and instead of walking through certain set paths based on a narrow script, I began to break molds that my Chinese father had set down, exploring things in dramatic and even ostentatious ways. Rather than remain an inhibited and repressed Chinese father's son, I pursued my dormant sexual interests in the plethora of scripts available to me. One groundbreaking event in the formation of my sexuality was a retreat I attended the summer before my junior year entitled "The Gendering of Power," in Oregon.

One of the goals of the workshop included acknowledging, recognizing,

and coming to terms with our worst socialized fears. Though I initially felt extremely nervous, in a private counseling session with Joanne, an open, accepting, twenty-four-year-old, I eventually felt comfortable sharing with her my fears around public speaking and even my anxiety about penis size. I remember Joanne looking at me, and as a smile crept across her face, curiosity and trepidation simultaneously overcame me. Her eyes brightened as she suggested that I take the opportunity at creativity night that evening to write slam poetry about my penis and present the piece while wearing nothing but a G-string! I immediately burst out laughing as I visualized the absurd image; my emotions oscillated between ridiculous bemusement and the fear of absolute humiliation. I laughed again, so as not to permit the emotion of fear to overcome me—and decided that I had to do it.

The image is still crystal clear. I am almost completely naked, in all my vulnerability standing on stage in front of fifty people having just raved, and displayed a full range of emotions through a poem about my penis, when the audience erupted into overwhelmingly supportive applause. I could see tears breaking through smiles; a powerful sense of reclaiming my self, my body, and my own freedom to express my sexuality seized me.

I still wonder what exactly prompted me to fully expose myself in such a flamboyant, out-of-character performance, but the results were undeniably positive. On one hand, the physical and verbal exorcising of my fears through a penis monologue had helped me to realize that these fears were simply emotions; since the emotions did not compose my personality or my true self, I could be liberated from them. On the other hand, empowerment came from the incredible validation I received from the wonderfully supportive audience. Thus, the process itself was an important step toward accepting myself and being accepted by others as a fully sexual being.

The entire experience provided me with a different framework to look at both my sexuality and my personality as a whole. I came to realize how entrenched my fears about my own sexuality were. Why was I desperate to prove that I was a sexually confident person through streaking challenges, yet deathly afraid to have anyone see my penis in any public setting, even the changing room? Why did I always feel so left out in conversations about male sexual bravado? Why was I so afraid of sexual intimacy? I began to realize just how ingrained my fears of public speaking and leadership were. Why was I always so afraid of speaking out in class? Why was I so afraid to take on leadership roles in high school? I began to realize how negative a Chinese identity I had adopted. Why, for example, over the past

five years, had I bought into pronouncing my last name not like it was supposed to be pronounced, "Ng" (tongue wedged to the back of the throat but rather with an anglicized adaptation, "Nig" (tongue slightly curled; placed behind the lower teeth)? Why was I ashamed for so many years to say that I was born and raised in Hong Kong? I finally realized that I was ready to confront my two worst fears: those regarding masculinity and ethnicity.

Consequently, I felt a strong desire upon returning to college for my senior year to share my insights with my closest friends. The experience had such a profound impact because I was able to break away from many of the limiting stereotypes, particularly around sexuality, which I felt had stuck and jacketed me as a young Asian man. I yearned for a more genuine, intimate connection with my friends. I wanted to invite them to share their own personal narratives and struggles after I had shared mine. I wanted to be able to feel comfortable enough to cry with my closest friends, especially male friends, and break past my gender-based rules about emotional displays. I had gained a newfound sense of confidence, grounded in provokingly challenging traditional roles.

Perhaps most significant, I could now remind myself, "I am a sexual being." Part of this realization was the fact that I was potentially capable of arousing other men or women through intimate physical contact. One attractive younger woman had come up to me after my reading and whispered in my ear that she liked men with small penises. "Wow!" I remembered thinking to myself, excited that I was establishing my own confident definition of what masculinity meant to me. Having challenged many of my own assumptions of masculinity, and having begun the process of confronting my own homophobia, I found myself motivated by the momentum of the workshop to begin to explore where my sexuality would unravel with a close male friend.

In some ways an unlikely partner, in other ways an ideal one, Justin, short, loquacious, Jewish senior was both available and very receptive to my advances. Early on I sensed he harbored a strong admiration for me that gradually continued to build as our relationship progressed, and as I developed more trust in him I realized that Justin would never tell anyone about the intimacy I foresaw would occur. I trusted Justin, and I felt extremely safe. Furthermore, since he was naturally more effeminate and passive, I noticed myself taking most of the initiative to act on sexual impulses and move our relationship into more intimate waters. Thus, through the experience of leading, I suppose my own masculinity felt affirmed.

As I saw it then, I was not really gay. I was just a heterosexual male experimenting with other guys, so open about his sexuality that he was free about the clandestine nature of our relationship: we would sneak off to the study rooms in the basement of our dorms where no one would ever study to have our midnight rendezvous. With the door jammed shut, books dispersed on the table to suggest that we were studying, and the lights off, we fumbled around to pull each other's clothes off and touch each other in places that we had never been touched before. The whole experience was all so novel, so spontaneously teenage, pubescent, and awkward, so secretly "dirty," so unscripted. At times I felt lost and confused, and at times I felt simply curious. Eventually, I ventured an explanation as we reflected together on our relationship—I viewed sexuality as a spectrum, and we were just two liberal guys trying to figure out exactly where we fell on that spectrum.

Determined to branch out, I did not limit my sexual activities to Justin and within a few weeks I had grown even more confident in myself and my ability to act on my sexual impulses. Over the next summer, a friend named Parker had flown out to Toronto to visit me. The timing was rather opportune, as I had recently met Annette and Carissa, two French Canadian girls, and I had invited them to spend a night with Parker and me up at a ski resort two hours away from town. I may have been partly motivated by a desire to prove my masculinity to Parker. I later that evening after a romantic dinner and a few glasses of wine, we found ourselves all deciding to take a nude dip in the hot tub. Surrounded by a sea of bubbles and the gentle purl of the water jets, I became increasingly self-conscious as I listened to the inner voice in my head. It began to say, "Okay, now's your chance. All of you are nude in the hot tub, you've got to make a move—make it suave, offer to give Annette a massage. This is an amazing opportunity. For heaven's sake, she's beautiful and naked! Oh, for crying out loud. . . . come on, take some initiative! Show her what a *real* massage feels like." With a wide grin on her face, she gracefully accepted the offer I finally made, at which point Parker and Carissa decided to make their way up to the bedroom.

The experience that followed was rather surreal and in some ways almost seemed like a reenactment of a chapter out of *The Latin Lover's Guide to Sexual Secrets*. I was determined to prove my masculinity by helping Annette come to orgasm and to be the most sensual lover I could be. Though I was very attracted to Annette physically, I felt that the experience was as much about performance as it was about pleasure. In contrast, with Justin

the sexual experience was about exploration, play, affection, and respect. In my mind raged a constant debate as I tried to satisfy the masculine pressure to act dominant, as if I knew exactly what to do, yet also to please an emotional connection. I realized that an emotional connection ultimately what makes sex transcendent—something my father had never really taught me. But with Annette, intimacy was suddenly replaced what I now see as a gender-based cultural script, as I found myself straining to avoid eye contact with her. The situation may have been too intimidating as I felt myself becoming too vulnerable. Then again, perhaps it was my own inexperience. Perhaps it was my nervousness in assuming I was expected to "perform" at a certain level, or perhaps it was my maleness and the implicit gender assumption that men are supposed to be stoic and nonemotive.

Nevertheless, I distinctly remember her commenting to me after hours of having done just about everything short of sexual intercourse: "You are not like the guys back in Montreal. You are so much softer, give much more attention—almost as if you were my steady boyfriend. I sat there quietly brimming with self-satisfaction, affirmed and pleased on a certain level that I could bring as much satisfaction to a woman as a man; yet I was confused the next day when she appeared alone and conversation was limited to a minimal exchange of a few words over breakfast. As I paused for a moment to reflect, I wondered if the great degree of satisfaction that I had derived from my relationship with Justin was due to the fact that I had in fact a greater inclination toward nonsexuality than heterosexuality; but then I questioned whether this was true.

What I have learned is that intimacy is most profound when experienced hand in hand with emotional displays of affection and constant communication about feelings; whereas sexual attraction expressed physically, the sentiment of these other factors, does not mean as much. I realized that the problem with only exploring sexuality on a physical dimension is that the sexual experience often gets paired with stress. I needed to bring my partner to orgasm, and I needed to be able to sustain an erection and have my own orgasm—at the right time, of course. In the process, I was ignoring my own needs. I could not allow myself to be absolutely vulnerable, to trust, and to connect, not just on the physical but also the emotional level. I felt harnessed by my maleness, emotionally chained down.

Thus, after much pondering, discussion, and self-reflection, I have come to develop different theories on sexuality to explain not only my own behavior and thought processes but also those which I have seen and experienced in others. At one point in time, I genuinely thought that even

single person on the planet was bisexual. I justified this by theorizing that it was simply the case that most people were actually living in denial. On a certain level perhaps I still ascribe to this fluid, polymorphous theory on human sexuality, yet part of my inclination to believe this may arise from my own insecurity in choosing a firm sexual orientation.

The problem for me with identifying myself as gay has always been that I have never really felt like I was gay. Stories by gay friends describing critical markers of growing up gay do not resonate with my experience. Furthermore, I have been and still am very physically attracted to females. At the same time, identifying myself as heterosexual does not seem like an ideal fit either, since I do find some men physically attractive. Having experimented sexually with both sexes, I feel that I am capable of connecting on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels intimately with both men and women. Perhaps I would be most comfortable now in identifying myself as a bisexual male still working through my own homophobia while simultaneously struggling with my own definition of masculinity.

All of the different aspects of my identity that I had been grappling with—my ethnicity, masculinity, and sexuality, as well as the deepest concerns I had about my relationship with my father—all came to the forefront of my life in the weeks approaching my college graduation ceremony. Just two weeks before the ceremony was to occur, I sat down with Chris, a close mentor who was also a college administrator, to have a late evening private conversation. It occurred to me that night that I was sitting on a tremendous amount of anxiety and fear around inviting my father to attend my graduation ceremony. I knew that my mother could not attend since she was attending my sister's high school graduation abroad, yet I was surprised at how reluctant I was in inviting my own father to attend the ceremony.

The fears I was sitting on around graduation were intertwined with fears of rejection and embarrassment. I wondered, was I still Chinese enough by his standards? Would he still find something in me to be proud of if I told him I wanted to become a teacher rather than go into business to make money? Would he accept me if I told him about my feelings around sexuality? I began to realize that I didn't know if I had ever lived up to what my father's expectations were. I was scared of his disowning me, his utter disappointment shadowing my glorious day to be proud of.

I made one of the hardest phone calls of my life that night inviting to my graduation, and my father did attend the ceremony two weeks later. I had decided that I was going to make every effort to make him feel that he was welcome, to be proud to introduce him, and to challenge

In fact, he was so proud of me when he came over that he didn't even mind when I pretended he was the graduate as I took off my graduation gown and hat, placed them over him, and encouraged him to walk around with my diploma in his hand.

Graduation, in some ways, was a major step toward reconciliation in our relationship. I had the opportunity to have an honest dialogue with my father about my fears of rejection and failure in the face of high parental expectations. I also seized the opportunity to discuss acculturation in the context of race and ethnicity since it had always been a salient issue in my life. Part of coming to terms with who I was involved reconciling the distant personal relationship I had with my father, but I also realized that I needed to reconcile with myself what it *really* meant to be Chinese, since that was the source of much of our conflict. So much of what I had written off for years was beginning to surface; I was beginning to make sense of cultural values passed down through the generations, but I still did not understand my own ethnic heritage.

With regard to my ethnicity, my sexuality, and my masculinity, sometimes I wonder if I am simply going through phases of trying on new identities and roles—a kind of *moratorium*, as identity theorist Erik Erikson might suggest. However, I tend to phrase my current state more as a continuous cycle of creation and exploration; and as I embark on a career path in the field of education, I hope to be able to share some of my personal stories and struggles to help future generations begin the process of intrapersonal discovery—examining oneself in depth.

Looking forward, I see the primary challenge in my life being the continuation of a progressive transformation in my relationship with my father. I take pride in the strides I have made in my own personal development, as I shift away from the more traditional views of masculinity and ethnicity, and at the same time incorporate a more mature view of my own father, as I see how he is but a prisoner of his own upbringing. While I see my roots as an important connection to my past, I do not see them as defining my future. I feel, therefore, that it is important to find out more about Chinese history, Chinese American/Canadian history, and my family, in an effort to ground my identity though not to define myself completely. I have sat down with my father and looked at my family tree to try to understand my generational roots, and I recently watched a Chinese film about a father and son relationship following which my father and I had a discussion about core Chinese values such as respect and family honor.

I am developing an appreciation of the things that make me different and unique from my Caucasian friends. The personal significance and

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value I attach to family has in many ways been shaped by the close relationship I have with my uncles and aunts on my mother's side. My Chineseness is now about claiming pride in the foods that I grew up eating, introducing my Caucasian friends to dim sum, teaching them how to use chopsticks, sharing our unique holidays, festivals, and traditions, such as giving red *lai see* packets, and even learning Mandarin again so that my friends do not simply assume for me a default white identity.

Still, there is nothing I see myself focusing on more than my relationship with my father. I would like for him to be able to acknowledge the past pain and hurt that has come between us and to fully embrace the identity I have built for myself. I want him to see that my desire for an honest, emotionally intimate father and son relationship is not in opposition to the values that are most dear to him. I want him to understand that I do see myself as the end of a long ancestral lineage, and that I value everything for which he and his ancestors have struggled. I am tired of constructing layers of social identities that do not communicate a consistent core self across space and time, and I want to disclose an authentic version of myself without having to face the wrath of shame. Shame begets silence, and it is the silence that truly hurts in the end.

After spending three months in the Marshall Islands as a volunteer high school social studies and math teacher, Vincent Ng moved to Shanghai where he taught poetry and music appreciation at the elementary level at the Shanghai American School. The intersection of film, environmental, and educational interests then lured him into teaming up with a documentary film crew in rural northwest China working on a feature length documentary film, *China's Sorrow: Earth's Hope*. Intrigued by alternative educational practices, he is now teaching at a Montessori school in Beijing.



Afterword by Vernon Takeshita Revolution and Revelations

THE PERSONAL JOURNEY AND THE DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

Early into the twenty-first century, we can all be amazed that Americans continue to hold on to, use, and perpetuate the nineteenth-century concept of race. Race has been a rationale for enslavement, segregation, and imperialism. As an idea to rally communities around a larger shared identity, nearly every instance of extreme nationalism since the dawn of the last century has had some racial component, convincing believers that their interconnection was innate and that their political goals were consequently self-evident. The belief that race was "scientific" gave the concept a sense of being a fact of nature, even an expression of God's plan.¹

By the 1980s, however, critics realized that race had more to do with belief systems than science. It became fashionable in academic circles to describe race as "socially constructed." Yet, if the concept of race is quack science, why do Americans find this way of thinking so hard to change? Why do they continue to apply such an outdated concept to millions of Asian Americans?

This book provides some insight into the changing American concept of race, and it does so in an unusual and somewhat surprising manner—by picking the minds of young Asian American adults still in the process of defining their beliefs, their identities, and their connection to the larger society.

When I began to read the diverse essays in this collection, I wondered what meaningful observation or conclusion could I gain from writers barely out of puberty. Although full of enthusiasm, eager to tackle new concepts, and deeply earnest in every new revelation, these writers lack much worldly experience and show even less comprehension of larger con-