

## Choose your own me.

The best fragments of my identity are born of a combination of circumstances that each feel astronomical in odds. I think that is true of everyone. The bits and pieces of people that make them uniquely, unequivocally, individual are born of bizarre coincidences. The fragments of my identity don't always get along, especially when I'm holding a remote. Some of them are downright at odds with one another. One says keep your nose clean and brain sharp. The other says no one's looking pick your (\*cough\*) clichéd superhero flick. One says be proud, tell your child what you've done. Own and share your heritage! The other says be pride goeth before a downfall; what's so bad about a Bollywood drama anyway? I wish there were a show that would satisfy all of those identities. Which of my identities should speak to the identity at the helm in your head right now so we can arrive at that one screenplay to rule them all? Come into my head parlor, let's explore some of me and make that choice together.

Identity number one - the green kangaroo. Let me take you back to the 1980s. Seven-year-old me went to school and got called poo-face. I wish I'd been whimsical enough to believe they were calling me a stuffed bear that wears nothing but a red shirt. Instead I was confused and unsure of what I should do with that circumstance. A couple years of that confusion reigned and then I had a new baby sister. I wasn't *the* baby anymore. That confusion became more confusing than the other. I didn't resent my little sister, she was pretty cute. Then again, I might have displaced my resentment onto my idol and the super genius of the family - my older brother - whose complexion was more fair and lovely (\*polite cough\*) than mine. One day I fought with him and chose to walk home on a different path. That caused an avalanche of decisions that took my mom and us kids to India before I got to finally play first violin in the orchestra winter show and snag that free ice cream at Northbrook Court. Not cool. The recipe card for this identity includes a dash of suburbia, two teaspoons of daughter-of-immigrants, a spot of Silicon Valley uncle and plenty of reading alone.

Identity number two - Schrödinger's kitty. In India, I discovered yet again no matter how traditional and how 'good' I

had been up until that point, I was other. I was not from there. *sotto voce*: I was also not blue-eyed, white and Christian, words chosen not by me, but by a ten-year-old friend of mine who triumphantly told me I therefore couldn't be American (\*shrugs\*) Nevertheless I persisted. I learned to read and write in Tamil, speak passable Hindi, understand Sanskrit conjugations and sandhis and samosas (dyac, that was samasas!). I dressed the clothes, ate the food, even majored in the obligatory STEM set of disciplines in high school - Computer Science/Math/Physics/Chemistry. I'll admit, my grades could have been better, but I derived from school the uncertainty principle and Schrödinger's cat. The recipe card for this identity includes a question and a call to action: Will I still be me if you open the box? I dare you to open it. Just a little... Oops, you let the kitty out - now you've unleashed a brand new identity.

Identity number three - Or is it thirty three? *Tridasha*. I could be easier on you and just call this identity the jack of all trades. But I'd rather go with the 33 kinds of deities in the Hindu pantheon and establish my love of mythology and folklore here. In adulthood, after school, I started my quest to do everything. I dabbled in Sound Engineering, Visual & Graphic Design, got a Pré-Diplôme in French, a certificate in Cake Icing, Henna Tattooing, Flameworking, Fibre Arts; I got married for three weeks, flew back to Chicago, double majored in History and Interdisciplinary Humanities, minored in Art History, played Everquest, built a craft website for my secret identity as the girlwhocriedwool, got married again and eventually settled down in the exotic land of Winnipeg (\*pauses for breath\*). I didn't stop everything there. I went on to join a community of senior writers under the aegis of Dr. Parameswaran, a complete stranger who ended up being a not complete stranger. I was a strong singer in the Winnipeg Tyagaraja festival with Dr. Venkatraman. I was a Stage Manager for a dance company by the name of Manohar started by Dr. Dakshinamurti. I mention their names because I owe them so much in the carving out of this conglomerate identity that I present before you today. I started a dance school and led a production picking up every bit of slack from sewing together costumes, writing scripts, recording audio, directing lighting cues, designing and printing invitations - it was a success, we had to turn people away from

an auditorium with a capacity of 350. I completed a diploma in Software & Database Development and became a Software Developer. I had a little one at the age of forty. I moved back to suburban Chicago to help my mother, who had a stroke that took more away from us than we could have imagined. There is no recipe card for this identity. You just throw a bit of everything in the pot, cover with water, and let it simmer for a little too long while you eat chocolate-covered digestive biscuits dipped in herbal tea.

Is your tea ok, by the way? I snuck some cardamom in it. That should keep you awake for a few more seconds because we're not quite done yet. Thanks to you and the rubber duck - I think I might have an idea of the answer to what I want to say and who I want to speak to. I've made the case for how I am unique given my multitude of identities. However, this does not mean I am alone. I know this because I have a squad - my Awkward hug squad. We are a group of friends with very different backgrounds, each with a diverse set of identities, and we *get along*. We love stories. We enjoy standup. We are frustrated by hypocrisy and bigotry. We want our kids to learn not to be bigoted or jaded and to have attention spans longer than my mollies and platies. Do you know how tough it is to find something to watch together? I'm tired of Baby Shark and I'm tired of watching Everything, Everywhere, All At Once after bedtime. It is possible to incorporate subtle humor buoyed by an undercurrent of poignant inquiry fueled by folklore and peppered with culture all without swearing or sexing it up. There are some productions that are out there, for sure, but there is room for more. I want that and I want to be a part of that. I'll don any hats I need to, I'll be a one-man band in a symphony of other artists. I want to do it right. I know this of myself if nothing else, I have a plethora of identities that can combine in different ways. I can spread them all out for you like a deck of tarot cards - pick one. Pick more than one. I'm her/them. Or if you'd rather, I'm not her/them. In the end... hear my plea. Pick me.