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Light Years

Stewart urged all of us to swiftly find our places around the table and scanned the cafeteria impatiently, tapping his finger on the table, waiting for the surrounding chatter of 10-year olds to wither. Having made sure that the only remaining noise that could be heard was the shuffling of feet along the lunch line, he leaned towards the center of the table. He raised the question: “If you place all the atomic bombs in the world in one location and detonate them simultaneously, what do you think would happen?” While my friends, perplexed by the unanticipated inquiry, continued to stare at Stewart expecting an explanation, I confidently responded that the earth would be propelled a short distance due to the force of the explosion, with which he disagreed profoundly. He reasoned that the earth’s orbit in the solar system, would remain intact simply due to its sheer mass. Our discussion at the lunch table soon magnified into a school-wide squabble that my friends humorously referred to as “The Nuclear Winter of 2008.” Every day, Stewart and I convened in the hallway with our following supporters to constantly reassert our positions and reject the other’s argument. After nearly three months of persistent bickering, our friends began to lose interest in the debate until the only participants remaining were just Stewart and I. In fact, by the fourth month, whenever we approached a group of students in the middle of our heated discourse, they would often disperse to evade our caustic debate and at times, even yell, “Screw off!” Realizing the need to dissolve this quarrel, I drew upon the fictitious alliance of my father and ultimately resorted to pretense as I told Stewart, “I asked my father yesterday and he said that I was completely right. Of course the detonation of *every* atomic bomb would move the earth!” My friend, who seemed dazed at the moment questioned, “Are you sure he said that?” To disguise my bluff and guilt, I replied with an even louder voice, “Obviously! Do you think I would lie about what my father said?” He gestured his hand towards his chest apologetically as he stated, “No, no that’s not what I meant. I’m sure your father knows the truth. He’s Asian so he must be good at science.”

It was customary, when I was six-years old, to have weekly conversations regarding my studies with my grandfather in his office. However, instead of initiating our discourse in his usual unemotional and reserved manner, my grandfather leaned towards me and firmly grabbed my hands. He waited until our eyes locked and stated, “You cannot forget who you are. No matter where you go, never forget about your people’s history and culture.” My hands could feel all the buds and sprouts of wrinkles that covered his palm. Trusting my grandfather’s years of experience and accumulation of wisdom, I vowed that I would never forget my heritage. My parents and I had decided, a month before my conversation with 할아버지 (grandfather), that I was to continue my education in Canada, away from all of my friends and family.

Having moved to Canada, I immediately obeyed the vow I had made with my grandfather by assimilating myself into the Asian diaspora in the school. Other than Stewart, who was a native white Canadian, most of my friends throughout my elementary years were Asian regardless of nationality. Of all the Asian students in our grade, I kept five of them: Zachary, Ethan, Ryan, Brett, and Matthew, dearest to my heart. Every class, we sat as a coalition, that would always finish the group work first, make the most, to our eyes, sophisticated projects and presentations, and after school, became a group of friends that was inseparable. During this period in my life, around the age of ten or eleven, anyone who saw me would have recognized me as a stereotypical Asian student. With my endless pursuit for academic excellence, my circular glasses, and frail frame, I became known, to my peers, as “the Asian.” As a recent immigrant to an unknown setting, I confined myself to a social group that only consisted of Asian friends that shared a similar cultural background. From the morning homeroom classes to lunch to our after school activities, we isolated ourselves from the surrounding community by only interacting with each other. However, at that time, I did not regard myself as a social outcast. Isolating myself with an Asian student body was, in fact, an opportunity. An opportunity to keep the memory of my historical and cultural Asian heritage intact. Moreover, I took *pride* in our isolation from society. To me, being Asian was a privilege, a title that granted one immediate intelligence in the eyes of others, and a title that could easily win you a four-month long quarrel.

In the beginning of my freshman year at Trinity, I entered the library to find myself making a decision that would alter my social life for the next three years. In front of me were two different tables occupied by the students of our grade, like solitary planets, seemingly outside the inner circle of tables. One, near the far corner of the room was encircled by Asians, those who were able to find each other and already establish a bond perhaps parallel to that of what I had with my Canadian friends. The other table was surrounded by a social group I was unfamiliar with: an amalgamation of hispanic, black and white students that were all seemingly having an enjoyable time. I was again given the opportunity to redefine myself in front of the eyes of my new peers. I scanned the room once more before making my ultimate decision. One of the Asian students, “Jay,” picked his head up from his phone and waved his hand towards his table, addressing me to come sit with them. Although the image of the Asian students conjured a heartwarming memory of my days in Canada,, without hesitating, I placed myself in the group nearest to me, the one with the unfamiliar aura, the one that lacked Asian presence. During that moment, I felt as if I had shattered my vow to my grandfather, the promise of maintaining my Asian heritage. However, no longer could I carry on my Asian identity. I had once viewed my race with pride, but my attitude, although difficult to admit, had transformed into one of disdain.

Near the end of the first week of school, one of the new Asian students approached me and uttered, “My friends and I are going out to Times Square over the weekend and I want you to come with us.” Intrigued and surprised that I was able to blend effortlessly into the Trinity community, I inquired, “Who’s going with us?” He pointed to a group of Asians sitting near the bench in the second-floor language hallway. With one glimpse, my body tightened as my internal organs cringed and I thought to myself that I could not be seen with that group of people by the rest of the school. I politely apologized, created an excuse that I frankly cannot remember, and physically distanced myself from them. I turned my back towards the Asian students and walked towards the Swamp, disgusted, perhaps for my mingling with the very people I tried to avoid or maybe for my own irrational loathing.

Throughout my high school life, I attempted to detach myself from the school’s Asian community without knowing the reason. Not only did I avoid talking to other Asians, but I began to revolve my interests and hobbies around activities that would allow me to avoid socializing with them. The first time I entered the chorus room in freshman year, I was delighted to find myself to be the only Asian singer in the school; surrounded by a variety of other races, I was content. Driven by the perseverance to further distance myself, I joined *Sons of Pitches*, the iconic male a capella group that was often mockingly characterized as the “whitest” organization in the school. Wearing khakis, blazers and ties to my performances, I assured myself that I had found my true-self in Trinity.

In the summer between my sophomore and junior year, I received my schedule and list of classes. I looked upon the form with delight realizing that I was admitted to the *History of Modern China* elective for both semesters. Taking *U.S. History, History of Modern China and English XI* in the following year, I romantically assured myself that I was a true man of the humanities, an academic that studied the essential art of human documentation. I further complained to my parents, “Why did I decide to attend Honors Math? I’m not like the other Asians, I’m awful in these classes!” In order to differentiate from the Asian students, I purposefully saw myself as a student that preferred the humanities over the usual math and science courses.

As I think about this now, perhaps my distaste for assimilating with Asians and the seeds of my internal conflicts were triggered by my Middle School experience, a memory that I had tried to repress. “How can you call yourself a Korean? You’re nothing like us,” a boy claimed as he approached me from behind. I desperately clawed for acceptance and mercy. “What do you mean? I’m just like you guys!” “Look around you. How are we like you in any way?” the boy challenged. I gazed around the school hallway like he told me to and surely enough, I was nothing like them. The way they communicated and behaved all seemed odd, and in a way, foreign. Was it my clothes, my Korean language tinged with Canadian overtones? The boy forcefully placed his hand on my shoulder and asked whether I had learned Precalculus, to which I abruptly replied, “No.” He asked, “Do you at least know what the Imjin War was?” I again, truthfully responded, “No.” The students around me burst into laughter. “There’s no way you’re even a bit Korean. What are you?” the boy persisted.

I refused to come out of my bedroom that night. My parents kept knocking on the door for me to come talk to them, but I drowned out their voices by burying my face under the pillow. My efforts to stay in control collapsed as I burst into tears. I had kept my vow to my grandfather; I had tried my best to maintain my Korean identity. What had I failed to do? I turned in my bed so that I could face the ceiling, covered by a map of constellations. So many stars, I thought. So many individual stars, yet there were also so many families: stars that together created celestial images, like *Orion, Taurus and Lepus.* For years in Canada, I had tried to preserve my sense of racial family and heritage. My identity had been shaped by being with Asians like myself; yet, I see now that I was, and maybe still am, like that star in the corner of my ceiling. The star that had no family and perhaps the star that was light years away from the rest.