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### I Have No Words

From fourth grade on, I felt as though all eyes were on me. Kids would run up to me at recess pulling their eyes, taunting me with phrases like, “This is what you look like Devin.” Some would even go the mile to say that I was “a banana” — white on the inside, yellow on the outside. I never really knew what to make of this comment; let alone any of the comments people made about me.

“I am Korean-American!” I fight back. The smile across my face widened as the words came out of my mouth; I was proud. This only lasted a moment until one of my classmates stood up shouting, “If you are really Korean then say something.” I stopped in my tracks. The expression on my face instantly changed from pride to fear as my cheeks turned a bright shade of red. I couldn’t actually speak Korean. I felt my palms begin to sweat, my knees start to shake, 20 pairs of eyes all staring at me, waiting for Korean words from the Korean-American girl. Others began to join in. “Come on, do it,” they ordered me. I opened my mouth but nothing came out; silence filled every crevice of the classroom, lingering through the atmosphere. They all continued to stare as if something was magically going to happen, but instead I ran out of the room. I’ve never again in my life felt that sense of embarrassment that I felt in that moment.

Moments later, I found myself in the bathroom, looking at my reflection in the mirror. I could feel the tears starting to well up in my eyes. I didn’t understand why they ridiculed me for stating who I was. I was a girl of Korean-American descent; was I wrong? Because after a while, I didn’t recognize the girl staring back at me. The longer I looked, the more she became a stranger—a girl with a Korean face, but only American words. It was then that I realized that I only ever knew how to *say* I was Korean. I never learned how to *be* Korean.

Growing up with a best friend who was also Korean, I watched her mother cook a variety of food in preparation for Lunar New Year and Chuseok, equivalent to American Thanksgiving. They would converse in secret as they knew I was clueless to what they were saying; I felt left out. I seemingly looked the part, but couldn't play the role. And after that, I could never proudly say that I was Korean-American because to others; I was *just* American.

In school, I always learned that the biggest part of a culture and sense of belonging into one, was language. Without knowing the language, I strongly believed that there was no place for me in that community. After years of being bullied for my lack of knowledge on my culture, I slowly started to believe what everyone was telling me and eventually, I lost the words that I never learned. To lose something that one never obtained, brings on a different form of pain. This pain doesn't merely go away with an ice pack or kiss from our mothers; this pain lingers. I could never articulate the words on how I felt about this loss in my life, until I read the Kevin Garcia article titled, "Can You Lose a Language You Never Knew?" While reading this article, I found my eyes beginning to open a little wider as someone else spoke on their experience with the disconnection between one and their culture. Garcia expresses this perfectly by saying, "Language is central to just about every cultural identity. And language, particularly for Hispanics, transcends national borders. We have a word for this: *Latinidad*. It's an understanding that Latin American communities are varied and complex, but connected by a shared language," (Garcia). Not only was it a form of communication, but it brought communities together; a sense of unity, something I never felt before. Garcia previously stated that, "[he] can't speak Spanish, [a] simple fact that fills [him] with shame." I have never related to something more. Realizing that other people struggle with language insecurity, I finally felt connected to someone who was experiencing the same feelings as me.

When it comes to my inability to speak Korean, I always look at my mother. For so long, I resented her for the lack of commitment she put into teaching me and my sisters about ourselves. I felt betrayed; like she wasn't being truthful with me. Looking back, I realize that I was too quick to judge my mother in the sense that I assumed she knew everything about her culture. I failed to stop and reflect upon the circumstances in which she was raised and the traditions and customs she was or was not exposed to. My mother was adopted from Korea at a young age, moving to America to be given a new life. With that being said, she was not raised to be interconnected with her Korean culture. She grew up in an environment where she was one of very few Asians in her town. She was brought up in an "American" household; learning and celebrating the culture of her adoptive family. And when later becoming a mother, she simply passed down the part of her heritage that she was exposed to; not her long lost Korean story. This is stressed in Garcia's writing as he quotes Amelia Tseng: "...growing up monolingual isn't anyone's fault" (Garcia). I never took the moment to put myself in my mother's shoes. I will never really know how it felt for her to be unable to give something to her children that she so desperately wanted for herself. It was never my mothers' fault for not exposing us to the part of her life that she had never even experienced herself.

For so long, I found every way to blame someone else for my feelings of disconnection with myself and my culture; feeling as though I would never be "Korean enough." By blaming everyone else in my life, I was only pushing away myself. It isn't anyone else's responsibility to mend the cracks of my identity. I must be the one to take control and guide myself through this journey of rediscovery. But there is still something holding me back. I always think back to the moment in that classroom; all eyes were on me as I stood frozen in fear. Fear. It is fear that has been holding me back from embarking on this journey of discovery and reconnection. I am

scared of discovering and becoming someone that I do not know; I crave familiarity. But that is just it. I will never know who I can become if I stay with what I am familiar with. I mustn't let my fears hold me back anymore for I need to be ready for change.

Since enrolling in this class, I have been exposed to many different sources of writing and opinions from a variety of people. I have been graced with the chance to look into other's lives and personal experiences with language insecurity and its connection to one's identity. I have gained the support from my peers and professors as they encourage me to expose myself to different clubs and resources here on campus. This has truly inspired me to take initiative and begin to open up about my own experiences regarding my race and identity and has helped me realize that I am not alone in this struggle.

While fear acts as a powerful barrier in my life, there are ways for me to overcome it. As I begin to adjust to the environment on campus, I have befriended some peers who are willing to support and teach me more about my Korean culture. What began as astonishment over my lack of knowledge, has now turned into curiosity and an eagerness to help; whether it be teaching me simple phrases or introducing me to new foods. They have opened my eyes to the proper way of addressing people of varying ages to myself and dishes I have never had; like the simple, kimchi fried rice. I am learning.

There are still moments when the heads turn to me, the eyes begin to stare, and I freeze. Am I making a mistake? This question constantly lingers within my mind, swallowing all of me in one bite. But it is in those moments that I have to remind myself that I am worthy and deserving of being a part of the Korean-American community.

Works Cited

Garcia, Kevin. "Can You Lose a Language You Never Knew?" *NPR*, NPR, 10 Mar. 2018, [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/03/10/588306001/can-you-lose-a-language-you-n-ever-knew](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/03/10/588306001/can-you-lose-a-language-you-n-ever-knew).