

Half + Half

[Writers on Growing Up Biracial + Bicultural]

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LIFE AS AN ALIEN

Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

I only now understand why it is that people lie about their past, why they say they are one thing other than the thing they really are, why they invent a self that bears no resemblance to who they really are, why anyone would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole.

—Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother*

I don't know where I come from. When people ask me, I have to stop and wonder what it is they really want to know about me. Do they want to know where I was born, where I grew up, where I have lived as an adult, where I live now? It troubles me to be so scattered, so fragmented, so far removed from a center. I am all and I am nothing. At the same time. Once, a long time ago, when I believed that answers were as easy as smiles, someone told me that home is where the heart is. Perhaps this is true. Love has always been a magnet. It is half the sky, the raggedy part that needs to be held up and saved. It is a

name as long as history with enough vowels for each of its children to claim. It is the memory of wearing open-toed shoes in December. Of mango juice running a straight river from your hand to your elbow.

Love is a plate of steamed white rice and pig's-feet stew. As a child, this was my favorite meal. I would sit at the dining table, my legs swinging back and forth, and hum as I scooped the food into my mouth with my hand. I always ate the rice first, saving the meat in a towering heap on the side for last. After I had finished the rice, I would wash it down with some water or Coco-Rico, this coconut-milk soda my mum used to buy. Then I would greedily dig into the pile of pork and choose the largest piece. When my teeth had grazed all the flesh clean off the bone, I would hold it to my lips and suck it dry of its juice. I would bite down hard until it broke in half and I could touch the marrow with the tip of my tongue. Right then, right there, I knew my world was complete.

Several years ago, in what I can only assume was a temporary loss of sanity, I decided to become a vegetarian. Swept into the New Age organic, fat-free health obsessions of Los Angeles, the city in which I live, I vowed to never again eat another piece of meat. Not fish, not chicken, and certainly never pork. In preparation for what I believed would be a permanent change of lifestyle, I spent the morning of my first meatless day in the produce section of the supermarket stocking up on lettuce and carrots, and at the bookstore buying books like *Diet for a New America*. Throughout the day, whenever I grew hungry, I would pull out a carrot stick or rice cake and nibble, often squeezing my lips into a tight purse of dissatisfaction after swallowing. What I really wanted to be eating was fried

chicken. It felt strange to not eat meat anymore; nothing I took in seemed to fill me.

"You'll get used to the change," a friend promised. "Pretty soon, the idea of putting that stuff in your body'll turn your stomach." We were at an Indian restaurant celebrating my newfound diet. I pondered what she said, scanned the menu, reading only the selections listed under the heading "Vegetarian," and ordered the Saag Paneer with Basmati Rice. When my dinner arrived, a gentle nostalgia descended upon me. The food—a creamy stew of chopped spinach—resembled kontumare, a Ghanaian dish I very much enjoy. I was, all at once, swept up by the force of habit—the habit, that is, of moving my head, torso, and legs in rhythm to a series of closed-mouth "Yums." Except the pot of gold at the end of my culinary rainbow was missing. There was no meat. And that absence left me feeling so cheated out of an integral part of the experience I was having that before returning to my apartment I stopped by an uncle's house and begged the leftover remains of his curried goat dinner.

My attempt to be an herbivore was but one in a long list of numerous attempts I have made to create or "try out" a new identity. In my twenty-four years of living in America, I have adapted to all sorts of changes. I have housed many identities inside the one person I presently call myself, a person I know well enough to admit that I don't know at all. Like a chameleon, I am ever-changing, able to blend without detection into the colors and textures of my surroundings, a skill developed out of a need to belong, a longing to be claimed. Once, home was a place, perhaps the only place, where I imag-

ined that I really did belong, where I thought myself whole. That is not so anymore, at least not in the home that I grew up believing was mine. That word, "home," and all it represents has shifted in meaning too many times.

From the age of six, when I left Ghana and arrived in Washington, D.C., to be with my mother, who had been in the States already for three years, it was quite clear that someday we would return. There was always talk of going back. There were always plans being made, sentences being spoken that began with words like "When I go home . . ." Even after my father joined us, America was still just a place of temporary existence, not home. And in consideration of our imminent departure, assimilation was frowned upon. My parents tried to fan the flames of our culture within me, in hopes that it would grow into a raging fire and burn fully any desire I had to become an American.

English was spoken only in the presence of people who could not communicate in any of our languages (Ga or Twi). It wasn't as if my parents forbade me to speak English, but if I addressed either of them in English, the response I got was always in Ga. These days my father, now remarried to an American, speaks to me primarily in English, unless I speak to him first in Ga, and even then chances are he will respond in English. My mother still insists upon conversing with me in Ga. When it appeared as though I was losing fluency, she became adamant and uncompromising about this; in her mind, to forget one's mother tongue was to place the final sever in the umbilical cord. I do believe that she was right, but over the years I have praised and cursed her for this.

Although we didn't speak English in my house, we surely did sing in it. Music was a constant. We listened to reggae,

calypso, high life, jazz, and sometimes R & B, especially Motown songs by Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, or the Supremes. We also listened to country music—Kenny Rogers and Willie Nelson (which might explain my Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Lyle Lovett collections)—and disco. On weekends, my mother—wrapped like a burrito in a single piece of cloth and wearing traditional thong sandals—would listen to Manu Dibango while she was frying fresh fish or dipping a whole chicken she had just killed in our tiny kitchen into a pot of boiling water so its feathers would come off easily; or my father would sit—without shoes, socks, or shirt—in the living room playing Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley records, his head swaying from side to side, his knees bouncing. Like my mother he, too, was in the company of animals.

On one wall of the living room where he sat and sang was the long, scaly skin of a baby python. On the other was the skinned coat of a wildcat, its head plastered in profile against the white wall, with an oval hole where the eye would have been. Not far from the wildcat were two bows; hanging inside the open arc of each one was a tall, slender pouch containing ten poison-tipped arrows. They were his pride and joy. Sometimes I would beg my father to pull down the arrows and let me touch one. When he did, I would hold it carefully, my small hand trembling as it wrapped itself around the thin stick. After a few minutes, he would take it from me and place it back in its pouch with the other arrows.

I remember asking my father once if he had actually used those very weapons to kill the snake and wildcat. I imagined that only someone with tremendous strength could do something like that—a warrior. I don't recall whether he said yes or no, but the image of my father holding his big, muscular arm

high above his head and darting an arrow straight into the body of an animal became my pride and joy. But, like the pig's-foot stew, it was a pride that I was able to acknowledge and partake in only within the confines of our apartment. Most of the exposure I had to homes outside my own was through my friends who invited me over to play or eat dinner. Yet that was all it took for me to see how vastly different the life I led was from their lives. None of the Americans I knew in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. had dead animals and deadly "primitive" weapons tacked up on their walls. They had plaques, awards, framed photos of their smiling families. They had pets, animals that were very much alive and very much loved. They bought their food prepackaged in boxes or in cardboard trays. And there were no bare-chested warriors singing of the Zion train, no mothers peeling, slicing, chopping, killing. Taken out of the context of my home, my life—live chickens, reptile and wild-cat skins, bows and arrows—became a source of shame and embarrassment for me.

In this way, the split between the me who lived in that apartment and the me who had to learn how to survive outside it was immediate. It had to be. Initially, I suppose that I viewed that split simply as an external divide, straight and pronounced, like the threshold of our front door, marking the point of separation between two distinct realities. On one side was America, on the other was Ghana. And I didn't know how to bring them together, how to make one make sense *to*, let alone *in*, the other.

Why do you talk like that? Where are you from? Is that string in your hair? Newness is easy to detect, especially with immigrants. Everything about you is a dead giveaway. And people

constantly watch and stare through the scrutinizing lens of curiosity. That was a foreign thing for me, being questioned, being eyed. From top to bottom, the eyes would travel. From top to bottom, taking a silent inventory of the perceived differences: the way I wore my hair wrapped with thread as thick as an undiluted accent, or in small braids intricately woven like a basket atop my head; my clothing, a swirl of bright, festive colors dyed on fabric much too thin for the shivery East Coast climate.

Being black made the transition from Africa to America extremely difficult because it introduced another complex series of boundaries. In a racially divided country, it isn't enough for an immigrant to know how to float in the mainstream. You have to know how to retreat to your margin, where to place your hyphen. You have to know that you are no longer just yourself, you are now an Asian American, a Latin American, an Irish American, or, in my case, a black American. (Only recently has the label become "African American.") At the time of my emigration, the early 1970s, Washington, D.C., a predominantly black city, was awash in a wave of Afrocentricity. Dashikis draped brown shoulders and the black-fisted handle of an Afro pick proudly stuck out in many a back pants pocket. However, despite all the romanticizing and rhetoric about unity and brotherhood, there was a curtain of sheer hostility hanging between black Americans and black Africans.

The black kids I encountered, in and out of school, were the cruelest to me. While other children who were being picked on for whatever trivial or arbitrary reason were called a host of names tailored to their individual inadequacies—Frog Lips, Peanut Head, Four-Eyes, Brace-Face—there was

no need to create a name for me. *You—you—you African! Go back to Africa!* Who I was seemed to be insult enough; where I was from, a horrific place to which one could be banished as a form of punishment.

The white Americans—children and adults—I met attacked me with verbal “kindness,” not verbal cruelty. But it was no less hurtful or damaging. Their branding came in the form of adjectives, not nouns—special, exceptional, different, exotic. These words, which flowed so freely from the lips of teachers, parents, and fellow students, were intended to excuse me from my race, to cage me like some zoo animal being domesticated; these words, I realized years later, were intended to absolve those white people from their own racism. I was among the black people to whom many white people were referring when they said, “Some of my best friends . . .” I was complimented for not talking like “them,” not acting like “them,” not looking like “them”—“them” being black Americans, the only other physical reflections I had of myself besides my family. But, of course, that wasn’t acceptance; it was tolerance.

The one place where I found acceptance was in the company of other immigrants. Together, we concentrated on our similarities, not our differences, because our differences were our similarities. Still, I secretly envied the other foreign kids because I believed that their immigrant experience was somehow more authentic than mine. Unlike me, they were not caught in the racial battlefield of black and white, their *ethnicity* was visible. Mine invariably faded to black. They spoke languages that were identifiable. Everybody’s heard of Spanish, Korean, Chinese, even Arabic. The few people who had heard of Ga and Twi colonially labeled them dialects, not languages.

Of all the other immigrants, I got along best with my Spanish-speaking friends. For me, they were the middle ground between America and Africa. So when I grew tired of being pendulous, of going to and fro, I entered their culture and it became my home away from home.

In the second grade, I started taking Spanish lessons at my school, and the connection I already felt to that culture was quickly validated. One morning we were learning the Spanish words for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and all the foods usually served during those meals. The teacher, a heavy-hipped Nicaraguan woman with arms that looked like rolling pins, held up a card with a picture of a hazel-colored loaf of bread on it. When she flipped the card over to show us its name in Spanish, the word *pan* was written there in big, bold letters. My jaw dropped in amazement. *Pan* also meant bread in Twi.

One by one, I discovered other words, found other sources of affirmation, the biggest being the fact that I had the best of approvals, parental permission, to assimilate into that world. My mum was no stranger to it herself. She did the bulk of her shopping at bodegas, rummaging the shelves for suitable replacements for ingredients needed to prepare customary Ghanaian dishes. Often enough, she would take me along when she went to these stores, where stodgy men in blood-smearred aprons would greet us from behind their butcher blocks with smiles and deep-diaphragmed laughter. I felt a sense of freedom in the narrow aisles of those stores, with the tickling smells of hot peppers and the loud chorus of tongues that were kin to my own. I was both outside and inside the split, within the distance between home and here.

But it was not a steady resting place. The Latino kids were

also in motion, also trying to reach beyond themselves, searching for their own middle ground. And when I traced the pattern of their movements, it led me right back into my skin. Their middle ground, en route to whiteness—the ultimate immigrant assimilation goal—was black America. So I followed them there. By then, I had befriended two black American siblings, Karen and Allen, who lived with their mother in an apartment upstairs from mine. Allen (who is now married to a Ghanaian woman) and I were the same age, but I was closer to Karen, who was a year older. She taught me how to jump double-dutch and “snap” back when kids teased me.

“Tell ’em, ‘Yo’ momma,’ ” she’d advise.

“Your mama,” I’d repeat, rolling my eyes and sucking my teeth the same as she had done.

Allen would always barge into Karen’s room when she was in the midst of schooling me and poke fun. “You sound like a ole white girl,” he’d say. And, at that time, that’s the last thing I wanted, to “sound” white. I wanted to sound like Karen and Allen and all the other black kids at school. Every day when I left their place and went back to my apartment, I would stand in front of the bathroom mirror and practice speaking like them. I practiced and practiced until, finally, when I listened to the sound of my voice, I could no longer hear an accent. By then, I was in fourth grade.

When I rid myself of my accent, I suddenly internalized the divide, blurred the lines between continents and allegiances. There was no middle ground anymore, no threshold, no point of distinction between one reality and another. I had strayed so far away from the place I called my home that I could not find my way back. From that point on, every culture I made contact with seeped in to create one fluid geography

within me. Yet as much as I imagined that I could claim them all, I still belonged to none of them. I didn’t even belong to the one in which my family resided, the one that had once provided me the safety of a home base. Like everywhere else, I became the “other” there, unable to fully expand and unfold the many selves I now had, unable to ever again feel completely whole.

It seems fitting that, of all the cities I could have chosen to live in when I moved from the city where I grew up, I found myself in Los Angeles. This place is the most accurate external portrait of my internal existence. It is a place where everything is subject to change, where even the land is not stable. It is a city of illusions; what you see is not necessarily what is. People come to Los Angeles in search of their future, in spite of their past. Identities and images are created, killed, or altered here on a daily basis. Over a hundred languages are spoken; cultures overlap, blend, and produce hybrids. There are African American street vendors selling teriyaki burritos, and Mexican cooks in the kitchens of Jamaican restaurants. Far from being idyllic, it is a city at war with itself, a place where xenophobia and self-hatred run rampant. And I have never felt more at peace anywhere else. As the result of a recent incident with my six-year-old daughter, Korama, I began, for the first time, to accept myself, my history of traversal. I began to create a context for the cross-cultural life that I have led.

For whatever reason, in the course of one of Korama’s kindergarten conversations, she let it be known that my favorite television program is *The X-Files*. That afternoon when I picked her up from school, she told me about the disclosure. “Oh. Okay, Korama,” I said, releasing a slight breath of relief.

I was happy to know that she and her friends were now exchanging what I believed was less personal information about their parents. Just a few days before, she had spurted out, in a fountain of giggles, that her classmate's mother wore G-strings; and the day before that I learned of another mother's recent miscarriage.

"Mo-o-m," she whined, "it's not okay. They said you like that show because you're an alien. I tried to tell them that you weren't, but Hugo said I was wrong. He said that you're not from America, and that everyone who's not from here is an alien. Is that true? Are you an alien?" She stared at my head as if antennae would pop out at any time. I wasn't sure how to reply, but with the shrewdness that parenthood teaches you, I tried to figure out a way to answer her question without volunteering too much information that might, ultimately, confuse her. While I was mulling it over, she and I walked side by side in silence. With each step, I felt a distance growing between us. It was a distance much wider than the gap of generations that eventually settles between parents and children. And it was haunting.

For a moment, her stare was as disempowering as those of the American children whom I had encountered as a child, her questions as offensive. I wanted to arm myself against the pain of being reminded that I was "other." I wanted to beg that little girl before me to try, to just try to accept—if not love—me for who I was, the way I was, no matter how different that seemed from the way she was. But I knew I didn't have to, because she already did. "Yes," I finally said to Korama, "I am." I explained to her that in addition to creatures from outer space, the word "alien" was used to refer to human beings from other countries. I expected her to be a bit confused, but she didn't

appear to be. She nodded, reached out for my hand as we approached the street we had to cross to get to our apartment, and the distance disappeared.

When I tucked her into bed that evening, she raised the subject again. "Mom, will you always be an alien?" she asked. And, again, I tried to find a straightforward, uncomplicated response, this time to a question I had been trying unsuccessfully to answer for over twenty years. "No," I told her. "Not if I become an American." Up until the second I said that, I had never so much as considered becoming a United States citizen. In the belief that I would one day return to the country of my birth, I had never made a commitment to being in the country where I have spent the better part of my life. I had always thought of naturalization as nothing more than a piece of paper one received after passing a test, a series of questions designed to assess one's technical knowledge of the country and the laws by which it is governed. If that's the case, I could live or die without that slip of paper, that change of nationality. It wouldn't make a difference one way or the other. I have lived my life as an alien, an outsider trying to find a way and a place to fit in. And it is only through that experience that I have come to think of myself not as a citizen of one country or another but, rather, of an entire world.