GROWING UP ACROSS RACIAL AND CULTURAL DIVIDES

MIDDLE GROUND

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On one side was America, on the other was Ghana. Bringing them together was something she didn’t know how to do. By 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.

—I Jamaica Kincaid, My Brother

I DON’T KNOW WHERE I CAME 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 obses-
sions of Los Angeles, the city in which I live, I vowed never again to 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 sag paneer with basmati rice. When my dinner arrived, a gentle nostalgia descended upon me. The food—a creamy stew of chopped spinach—resembled konumare, 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 attempts I have made to create or try out a new identity. In my 24 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 imagined 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 6, 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 they would grow into a raging fire and burn fully any desire I had to become an American.

English was only spoken in the presence of people who could not communicate in 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 Eng-

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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 the 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-feet 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 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 on 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 wildcat 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, 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 immigration, the early 1970s, Washington, a predominantly black city, was awash in a wave of Afrocentricty. Dashikis draped brown shoulders, and the black-fisted handle of an Afro pick proudly stuck out of 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 cruellest 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 pedulous, of going to and fro, I entered their culture and it became my home away from home.

And as a result, I became a black American. I became a member of the majority culture. I continued to live in the same city, the same neighborhood, the same block, the same building. And I lived it. I breathed it. I felt it. I gazed through its eyes and felt its taste, its form, its touch, its sound, its smell, its movement, its life.

And yet, it was not mine. I was always an outsider. A part of the community but never really a member. There was a disconnect, a distance, a chasm, a divide between us. When I ventured outside, I did so cautiously, gingerly, with a heavy heart, and longing in my eyes—longing for a place where I belonged, a sense of belonging.

I dreamed of a place where I could be fully myself, a place where I could be free to be black, to be proud of my heritage, to be proud of my culture. A place where I could be accepted for who I was, not what I looked like, not what I said, not what I did. A place where I could be fully myself.