

What Are You

by Katelyn Hemmeke

1. I found my Korean name in the junk drawer. It was printed in old typewriter font on a tiny pink bracelet; the kind that small offspring wear after they are born at the hospital.

But my parents did not take me home from a hospital. They took me home from an airport, after a Michigan Court told them that they could.

2. Things you cannot find in a junk drawer: A whole culture. An entire language. A face that looks like yours.

3. Any time I refused to finish my terrible food, my dad would say, “If you were still in Korea, all you would have to eat is a little bowl of white rice like this.” He would curl his workworn hand into a tiny ball, and I horrified would struggle to clear the tater-tot casserole from my plate.

5. For the local community production of “The King and I,” all of the girls in the ensemble—most of them the fair daughters of the good Dutch farmers who inhabit west Michigan—had to stain their blonde hair black (it turned out grayish-green), use black eyeliner to draw thick, slanted cat-eyes around their blue eyes, and paint their white faces a brackish orange.

a. I asked the director if I had to do that. “Well, no. You already have...*authentic* beauty”, he stammered like a broken wagon driving over rough terrain.

b. That year, I was voted onto the senior prom court. The prom theme was “Escape to the Orient.”

5. When I moved to Korea, taxi drivers and store clerks and *ajummas* asking for directions did not understand why I could not muster any responses to the questions they fired off in rapid lilting Korean. “Aren’t you Korean?” they barked, scowling at my Korean face.

6. One of the first things my (ex) boyfriend told his judgmental siblings about me: “She’s Korean, but adopted, so basically white.”

7. Things I learned in Korea: How to pat sunscreen and foundation into my skin to keep it as pale as possible. How to use chopsticks to wrap a crisp, fragile sheet of dried seaweed around a clump of white rice without breaking it. How to bow to the appropriate degree, how to say please and thank you in an accent passable enough that cashiers and bus drivers didn’t notice that I wasn’t actually smooth-tongued in Korean.

a. “You are so Korean,” my American friends said.

8. Things I could not learn in Korea: How to convince my high school students beyond doubt that they were beautiful even without double eyelids or sharp jawlines or legs as thin as toothpicks. How to drink clear, biting *soju* without feeling sick. How to explain, with perfect Korean grammar and vocabulary, that I was adopted, that I did not know my Korean family, that I had not hunted for them yet.

a. Strangers still asked, “Aren’t you Korean?”

9. When I went home for thanksgiving, my relatives argued about politics. Isn’t it so scary that Michigan has one of the largest Muslim populations in America, they said.

Isn't it such a good idea to build a wall to keep our selves safe. Isn't it fortunate that we live in a town like ours. With good values and at least one church in every neighborhood and not so many of *those immigrants*. "You gotta remember who you are and where you come from," my dad told me sternly as *Fox News* performed in the background.

10. My Korean co worker offered to contact the missing person department at the police station to help me find my birth family.

a. Who is the missing person--me, or them?