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I was led astray. The mall, packed with appealing boutiques, showcased a variety of linens, quick bites, and plastic toys. With their neon signs and cheerful mascots, the terror within my six-year-old heart seemed unfitting. My sweat-beaded forehead wrinkled as my eyes darted between stalls, desperately searching for any trace of English. My face felt red-hot, pulsating with a vivid intensity, as though I could feel every contraction of my tumultuous heart. What was this constriction rising through my chest? Was it fear, anger, frustration, or a chaotic fusion of all three? Cowering at the center of the mall floor, I became overwhelmed with panic as my cries were drowned by the commotion of an apathetic crowd. At age six, I was encompassed in a sea of languages I did not understand, enveloped by a people of contrasting culture, and engulfed in a tragic, though familiar fear of isolation. At age six, I was alienated by the nation my mother called home. Mom always said, "If you ever feel lost, I will always find you." At age six, I hoped that held true.

It was 11:30AM: lunch time. Throughout the years, I developed a silent habit of observing the lunches of my classmates before opening my own. The cafeteria filled with the scratch of tearing Velcro; today, lunch was Capri-Suns and Lunchables. Before opening my bag I felt anxious as I remembered that my refrigerator's Lunchables supply had run dry. I realized that what lay beyond the zippered barrier was one of my mother's homecooked meals. Urgently, my eyes began to scan my classmates' faces, praying that they wouldn't notice the pungent odors that those meals usually diffused. As one of only two Asian-American students in a white-majority school, anything against the norm was taboo. I tore the zipper quickly, hoping that the repercussions would be painless, but I was immediately proven wrong. The scent of steamed dumplings penetrated the lunchroom, and there were cries of protest as my classmates feigned nausea. I stood shamefully, my face downcast as I discarded my dumplings. When I returned

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home, my mom used to always greet me with a warm embrace. That day was no different, and with a proud smile, she asked me how my lunch had been. I lied blatantly, though I knew she saw through my smile.

The clash between dumplings and Lunchables embodied my Asian American struggle. Yet, alienation was never confined to America. I had felt familiar feelings of frustration, of isolation, in that Taiwanese mall just two years prior. Finding myself in Taiwan was a dismal failure upon arrival; I was ridiculed for my inability to speak, to understand, to assimilate. I wasn't American, yet I wasn't Taiwanese. I was alienated in both nations, a tragedy of the American melting pot. In subsequent years, formulating an American identity was my dream. I changed as the wind, yielding to any whim that came with the currents. I lost myself, and in my eyes, I was no longer the son that my mother loved. Yet everyday she was always there, waiting to receive me in her arms after school.

There in my mother's embrace, I came to know love. Although I neglected my culture, though I became unrecognizable, my mother's love stayed perpetual, forever waiting to receive her son. Her affection was impartial to where I called home, unchanging regardless of my changes. In her eyes, I was, and would always be her son. It was in this unconditional love that I found myself, that I established an identity in love and confidence rather than culture. In this realization, I now aspire to emulate the love of my mother, seeing past the surface, and it is through this ambition to love others in acceptance that I have learned true compassion. Mom always said, "If you ever feel lost, I will always find you." At age seventeen, I finally understood.

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