

*The Stain On My Face*

*By: Tenzin Youdon*

My name is Tenzin. My ama always told me my name was special. She would say, “Your name holds the weight of all your ancestors before you.” But literally, the names of all my ancestors were named Tenzin including my siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, everyone! It was the little blessing we all shared, the history of our name.

I grew up in Jackson Heights, a neighborhood in Queens. Known for being the most diverse neighborhood in ALL of New York City and home to many Tibetans including myself! The streets were crowded with vibrant colors, bustling jewelry stores, the warm smell of curry, and the sound of the 7 train running through the tracks. This was my home, these were my people, and I never felt alone. Until my life was uprooted when I moved to New Jersey and had to switch schools.

The night before my first day I had the jitters, I was finally going to be a middle schooler! I couldn't fall asleep and it felt like I had knots all tied up in my stomach. I knew exactly what would detangle those knots, the cure was my ama's famous warm hand-rolled thukpa, famous between me and my apa, but still famous! So, I begged and I pleaded, “Please make it for my first day, please I'll even refill the choesham water every day!” Her eyebrow heightened and I could see my delicious thukpa in the palm of my hands. I fell asleep that night dreaming about eating that delectable traditional meal and just being able to show it off like a prized possession to all the kids at my new school- I knew I was going to be the talk of the town.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of food and followed its scent all the way to the kitchen where I watched my ama flip balep with her bare hands. How she didn't burn herself, I'll

never know. I rushed to get ready so I wouldn't miss the bus and darted out the door, almost forgetting to take the meal that was going to get me in with the kids at my new school. I walked in ready to conquer the day with my head held high but I was greeted by sharp and judgmental glares so I ran to the bathroom thinking I had some of the leftover breakfast on my face, or maybe my hair was parted weirdly, or something was on my pants? But I looked into the mirror and all I could see looking back was my ordinary self, so why was everyone looking at me like I had something wrong with me? I walked out of the bathroom and could still feel the weight of people's eyes on me. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something on my face, like everyone was seeing it and not telling me. I began to feel knots tied in my stomach. So, for the rest of the day, I walked with my head down and eyes glued to the white ceramic floor. I watched the clock tick yearning for it to tick just a little faster, counting down each minute until lunch. My ama's thukpa was going to be the cure to my stomach knots and was going to get me to redeem myself. Lunchtime finally came and I looked around the cafeteria trying to find a place to sit but every open seat felt like it was guarded by sharp eyes. I finally sat down at a random table and greeted the people there. Opening my thermos, I licked my lips and my mouth began to water as I could see the steam traveling out of the container and the smell of the thukpa flooding my senses. But when I looked up the same reactions weren't met around me. The other kids acted as if they were trying to hold their breath. It was then that I realized why they were looking at me like I had something on my face the entire day. I was different. I didn't look like them, I didn't have the same lunches as them, I wasn't them and that bothered them. So from then on, I began to try to be less of myself. Trying to remove that stain that they all judged me for.

Pestering my mom to give me money for Lunchables and changing my name to “Tenz” because “Tenzin” was too hard for them to pronounce.

Tibetan New Year came around and my only New Year’s resolution was to get rid of that stain because all it did was make people at school look at me differently. Throughout the whole day of celebration, it was all I could think about. Until my grandmother brought over a large dumpling cooker to the table and I just watched as the clouds of steam traveled out the small openings on the top. The Tibetan dumplings crafted by my grandma’s delicate hands always tasted so delicious because in one bite an abundance of flavors rushed to my tastebuds. Her dumplings were always so distinctive because she would take the time to carefully fold each crease making sure they were all even. I licked my lips as my mouth began to water at the sight of it. But this time when I looked up the same reactions that I was having were met by everyone at the table. My resolution came true, the stain on my face no longer felt like it existed. But that feeling soon fled because I realized it wasn’t that the stain was removed but instead that everyone else at the table had one too. It only took time with my family to learn how to feel appreciation for my stain.

So the next day, I walked into school with my head held high and people continued to look at me like there was something on my face but this time I wasn’t ashamed because this time I knew what it was. It was a huge, proud smile running from cheek to cheek because I had a face with a name that holds history, culture, and identity behind it. Something none of their faces or names held.

