

(Don't) Color Me Yellow

When I was in first grade, there was a very clear division between who was cool and who was not in my class. This was true during recess when Nathan was picked over Mark to be on Jonathan's football team. It was true when Kelley decided that Brittany wasn't invited to her special themed birthday slumber party. And it was true when the time came for all of us in Mrs. H's first grade class to pull out our Crayola crayon boxes for art time.

You see, most of us, myself included, had the standard, school-supply-list recommended box of 16 crayons. It came with your basics like violet, green, etc. with a maybe a carnation pink and red-orange tossed in for good measure. Some kids, however, had the supersized 64-crayon box, the one that comes with its own crayon sharpener in the middle. Now, there are many possible reasons why this have's (the 64-crayon box owners) and have-nots (including me) disparity might have occurred. Perhaps their pet dog, the one they'd had since they were born that slept at their feet every night, had finally succumbed to cancer or old age. Or maybe their parents had been so late getting around to school-supply shopping that the stores only had 64-crayon boxes left. (This would never have happened to me; I harassed my parents the second the supply list came in the mail so that I could go pick out new notebooks, pencils, and an appropriately sized 16-crayon box.) Personally, I like to think that those kids with the 64-crayon boxes were compensating for something. Or maybe their parents were. Either way, the fact of the

matter is that while I was deciding whether the ocean was blue or blue-green, the kid to the left of me was choosing between aquamarine, sea green, navy blue, pacific blue – as well as my ordinary blue and blue-green.

My obvious inadequacy in the crayon department was most apparent, however, when it came time to draw self-portraits. I essentially had three choices: peach, yellow, or brown (obviously you couldn't be the white crayon because then you'd be invisible). The first time around, I picked peach and started shading myself in on my art paper.

"What are you doing?" said an accusing whisper. I looked around for a second trying to figure out what it was that I'd done and who my accuser was. Aha! Pigtails at 4 o'clock. "I'm coloring me in. Why?"

"You're not peach."

I'm not peach? Well I *knew* I wasn't peach. I mean she was "pasty pale with a ruddy complexion," but Crayola doesn't make that color, and she still got to use peach. No one was breathing down her neck about her choice of crayon. I should have given a normal six-year-old response and said that I didn't care, but in first grade they teach you to be nice.

"What color am I supposed to use, then?"

"I don't know. That one," she said and pointed to the yellow crayon. And in case I hadn't fully understood the first time around, she reminded me matter-of-factly, "Just not the peach crayon."

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For some strange reason, it seems as if people have always wanted to, needed to remind me that I am Asian – you know, as if I might have forgotten what I look like in the mirror. “Bet your favorite Power Ranger was the Yellow Asian one, wasn’t it?” or “You must be such a big fan of Lucy Liu!” Sure, they’re both fine, but I was a huge fan of Billy, the nerdy Blue Power Ranger, and my favorite actresses are Natalie Portman and Jodie Foster. I just have never understood what exactly the big deal is about my being Asian, at least any more so than my being, say, a voracious eater, which I am. Ask me to describe my physical appearance, and the most obvious things that come to mind are first female, then short, and *then* Asian.

Sometimes people remind me in ways less subtle. On a typical lazy day last July, my friend and I walked around downtown Boston where both of us were rooming together for the summer. We stumbled upon the Christian Science Church Park on Massachusetts Avenue, and even though neither of us are Christian Scientists, or even religious for that matter, we both stopped to appreciate the beauty of the Church and the reflection pool nearby. Stumbled is perhaps the wrong word to use in this context. If you’ve ever happened upon the same Church, you know full well that it is not something you so much stumble upon as are blindsided by because of the sheer size of the entire plaza. Rumor had it that the Church was also host to one of the largest organs in the world, and both of us were eager to take a look inside. Unfortunately for us, a homely-looking woman in a flower-patterned shapeless dress accessorized with a plastered-on

smile of welcome was hovering next to a set of pamphlets by the door and seemed especially intent on stopping us to talk.

“Hello, dears, did you want to see inside?”

We smiled and nodded, taking a step forward towards the church.

“We’re in the middle of service right now, but please do come back later tonight.

We have all types of services including ones for people like you.”

“Excuse me?” I said in a slightly strangled voice.

“You know, we have services in your language for you and your friend there. It’s wonderful.”

“Do you mean English?” I asked, my voice rising higher in pitch, “Because both my friend and I grew up here in the U.S. In fact, I was born in *Pennsylvania*, so I think the English service is just fine.”

“Oh, of course.”

It was an honest mistake by the woman and not one particularly extraordinary, but I found myself still mulling over the event for weeks afterwards. Why had this woman assumed that my friend and I didn’t speak English? Boston is a diverse enough city, especially its college-aged population, so that two Asian girls is not that uncommon a sight. As far as I could tell, my friend in her t-shirt and jeans and I in my summer dress and flip flops looked like ordinary college girls walking around.

“Do you think it’s because there were two of us together? Like if it had just been me, do you think the woman would have thought I couldn’t speak English?” I asked my boyfriend over the phone one night.

“Please don’t tell me you’re still thinking about this. That was over a month ago.”

“No, seriously! If it’d just been me, do you think she would have thought I couldn’t speak English?”

My boyfriend gave an exasperated sigh. “I honestly don’t know, Yiwei. I’m sure she wouldn’t assume you couldn’t speak English.”

“What if I’d been with a white friend instead? What about then?”

“I’m going to bed, Yiwei. Goodnight.”

The thing about thoughts like these is that they work their way into your brain, into your consciousness, so that what once seemed mundane and forgettable is all you can ever think about. It was as if everyone was looking at me and my world through yellow-colored glasses, but far from being pleasant, everything was just a garish yellow color, a Crayola yellow. Whereas I once gave no thought to whom I was spending time with or what we appeared like, I suddenly felt uncomfortably conspicuous anytime I walked around. I kept glancing around furtively at the faces of other people, trying to gauge their reaction, trying to guess what was going on in their heads. Do they notice that I’m walking around with another Asian person? Do they think I can’t speak English?

I’ve spent so much of my life not giving a thought to what color my skin is that I’m always genuinely surprised when other people take the time to notice. It’s not that I don’t

know that I'm Asian. How can I not? It's just not something that I really think about on a day to day basis. For example, the only really useful perk that being Asian has ever afforded me is that I don't get "forked" at restaurants in Chinatown. And even then, useful is a matter of opinion; more often than not, I *prefer* a fork over chopsticks when eating, Chinatown restaurant or not, and it can often be quite difficult convincing a waiter that you do in fact want a fork even though you're Asian. But thankfully, Chinatown restaurants are not a central part of my life, and so the moments where I think "Oh, right, I'm Asian" are rather far and few between.

Two weeks ago, I went to visit my boyfriend in Pennsylvania where he goes to college. My boyfriend is a complicated mix – raised in Indonesia where his family has been for many generations, but essentially of Chinese descent – and together we make a very Asian couple, a pair of "Asian dolls" as a person at the movie theater once told us. I'd never thought before about the fact that both of us are Asian. No one takes a second glance if they pass by a white couple or a Hispanic couple. Why would it be any different for us? But that night on our way to dinner, I couldn't stop thinking about what we looked like and what people thought of us.

My boyfriend stopped me outside the restaurant and turned my shoulders to face him. "Yiwei," he asked, "why do you care so much?" My boyfriend could not understand – he with his Asian mother who remarried a white man, he with his two-white stepsisters in his family vacation photos, he with his first words of English being at the age of 11 after immigrating to the United States. He was used to people noticing and defining him by the

color of his skin as they have every day he's stepped out with his family for the past nine years. So then, why *do* I care so much?

Because there is so much *more* to me than the color of my skin. And every time a woman at a church, a stranger on the street, a person reading this essay fails to see past the color of my skin, they are using my own skin to constrict me and to fit me into a box of who they think "people like me" might be. My Asian heritage is a large part of who I am, but it's something found inside of me, built by celebrations of Moon Festivals, phone calls with my grandfather, and my mother's homemade dumplings, not something characterized by the color of my skin. Tell me, *would I be any less Asian if I were less yellow?*

It's been over ten years since I last picked up a crayon. There are now over 120 colors to pick and choose from, and I can be olive green, tan, copper, or even hot magenta if I'm feeling particularly daring. The Crayola yellow is still there, same as it was when I was in first grade, and I can be that crayon too. But I'm thinking I'll choose the Tickle Me Pink crayon instead, because that is the crayon color I am on the inside.

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