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I'll Be Your Friend

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"I'll be your friend" was the first English phrase I heard, picked up, and used. Unfortunately, I did not understand the sentence and utilized it for everything.

"Mommy, can you buy me candy? I'll be your friend."

"Daddy, will you give me a piggyback ride? I'll be your friend."

"Auntie, can I sleepover at your house? I'll be your friend."

For some reason, I did not comprehend the statement that came out of my own mouth, but I quickly sensed it was positive. People would smile and sometimes giggle, and their light emotion brought warmth to the foreign territory I had landed on.

After immigrating to the United States from Korea in the spring of 1999, I lived in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Los Angeles. Streets always filled with trash, gutters smelled of urine, and overgrown weeds cluttered the sidewalks. Within the overwhelming atmosphere of *cumbia* music, street vendors, *Español*, and drunk people, I aspired to go to school in "the land of opportunities," which my mother constantly repeated like a broken record to motivate me to become successful. "공부 열심히 하고 대학교가서 좋은직장에 취직해," she would say. However as a five year old, I did not really pay attention to what my mother wanted. Instead, my goal at that moment simply was to adjust to the new environment- new home, new school, new friends, and the new language. I had big ambitions to become everyone's friend and to learn English as soon as possible. I was too excited for school and could not wait to show everyone my art and dance skills that I had practiced in Korea.

My first few years at Hoover St. Elementary were a piece of rice cake. In fact, kindergarten through the fourth grade flew by. There were a few other Korean Americans in my classes, and it was especially easier to have female Korean American teachers who taught me English through translations of Korean. I felt at ease having a piece of my homeland at another country. But most importantly, some of my peers understood my differences as a Korean immigrant- my accents, my grammar, and my ignorance of the American culture.

There were many times where I clumsily made embarrassing cultural mistakes, but my peers had ignored them and comfortably taught me the correct way of doing things. I remember a time during lunch when pizzas were served. As a young kid, I thought that Americans used forks and knives for every food they consumed (unlike Koreans who use chopsticks). Thus, I proceeded to grab my Styrofoam plate of pizza off the cold, silver cafeteria table where the cafeteria ladies were serving us to the long green tables where everyone sat to eat their lunches. As I sat down to take a bite of my pizza, I had an epiphany. I was in America, and I desperately wanted to become an "American." So I took my plastic spork and straw and pretended to elegantly slice my pizza as if I were slicing steak, my nose high in the air, eyes closed, and my head slowly nodding to

the left and right as if I were listening to some kind of classical music while I had lunch. Some group of friends eyeballed me thinking I was weird, some laughed after seeing what I was doing, while some looked at me in the eye and told me that was not the way to eat pizza. Smiling at me as if I were a baby and they were my mother, a few friends all grabbed their pizzas using their tip of their fingers. Then, they all took a bite of their food and told me to do the same. I was not totally embarrassed, although my red cheeks gushing with blood might have told a different story.

Up until then, my social life was fine. However, my naïve thought of easily making friends was not practical in the fifth grade. Fifth grade, I expected, was the golden era where I would have the most friends, be the most comfortable and the most powerful. I was finally on the top of the pyramid. I was the predator while other little students were my prey. Well, at least, that is how the other fifth graders explained their social status and power of becoming the big, wise, on top of the food chain fifth grader. Unlike my friends who were adjusting well to their last years at Hoover, I had finally realized that living as a minority within another minority community really bothered me. Most of my Korean American friends had culminated by the time I was a fifth grader and many others had moved to a different city. Not to mention, my elementary school was overcrowded previously with three tracks (different schedules of enrollment) and during my last year at Hoover, another track was added to sum up to four different tracks (A, B, C, and D). Thus, I had to start my whole social life again where I had to make new friends because everyone's tracks were changed. From this day on forward, I dreaded my life.

The new fifth grade students of track D were not friendly neither were they open-minded. Fellow classmates called me "*Chinita*" from left to right and interchangeably to *any* Asian girl. When I had learned what the word actually meant, I was heartbroken. "I am not Chinese," I would repeat again and again. "I am Korean. NOT Chinese." But my peers cared less about the difference. I attempted to approach my "friends" playing handball and tetherball, but they would always try to exclude me in ways I did not understand. "*Ay, mira a la Chinita* over there acting like she belongs to our group," they would say. Before school, during school, and after school, these other classmates "played" tetherball with me. However, they simply ganged up on me hitting the tetherballs in ways where either 1) I could not reach the ball at all and lost the game or 2) the tetherball rope hit my arms and I lost the game. As a matter of a fact, I never played a game that lasted more than one minute. All I wanted was to be their friend. I wanted to blend. I even wanted to be non Asian.

At times, I would try really hard to pretend not to hear what they were saying, and other times, I would try really hard to listen to the Spanglish they exchanged with each other. I wanted to know what they were saying but at the

same time, I was too scared to know the truth. I was an outsider. Without a best friend in elementary school, I focused on choir practice and culmination. I wanted time to speed up, and I only looked toward my future as a soon to be junior high student. There were many times when I wanted to punch in the face those who excluded and made fun of me for treating me miserably, and times when I cried myself to sleep because I felt hopeless and simply wanted to fit in the new social bubble.

Unfortunately, I was not able to reach out to my family for moral support. As the eldest daughter out of three girls, I did not want to disappoint my parents. I wanted to show them that I was able to handle difficult times by myself, and I was afraid of showing them my weakness. Simply, I sensed that my family did not need more stress to juggle their personal struggles as Korean immigrants living in the United States. My mom and dad did not speak English. Bills, phone calls, and letters were all filtered through me. "Hello, is Sara there?" a telemarketer would ask my mom. Almost immediately, she passed the phone to me. "Hello, Sara speaking," I replied. I was my parents' voices and I knew that my parents would not be helpful anyways. What were they going to do? Talk to the principal in Korean? How embarrassing. . .

A new opportunity opened before my eyes as I was coping with loneliness. It was the year 2004 when the summer Olympics started. The four 5th grade teachers of track D decided to hold the mini Olympics for the students. There were a variety of sports like basketball, shot put, track and field, and volleyball where every student had to participate to win the various medals of gold, silver, and bronze. My teacher, Ms. Treviño, decided to place me in basketball and shot put because everyone had to participate in at least one sport. While other students had practiced with their fellow teammates during nutrition, lunch, and after school, I practiced by myself. Besides, I was the only girl who was in my class's basketball team and shot put was an individual game. I was not at all excited to compete, and this mini Olympics only seemed like a mandatory activity in order to leave Hoover St. Elementary School.

The final day arrived. Standing outside under the sun, all of the students in track D were excited to win the gold medal and for their class to be claimed as the best in sports. I was not confident to play with my teammates, and I had hoped to just get the day over with. I did not have any spirit to win for our class, and playing basketball seemed like a chore. The game began before I was ready, and the ball went to the left and to the right repeatedly. I was just chasing after the orange sphere like everyone else. Although I was not contributing much as a player, my team was actually doing well and there was only a few minutes left-- it was the last quarter of the game. The other team was winning just by one point, so it could have been anyone's game. But then something horrible occurred. A guy from the other team fouled me and before I could do anything, I knew that all the

pressure was on me. I could either help my team win by making this free throw or. . . I did not want to think about the consequences.

All eyes were on me. Those friends who had outcasted me now glared at me. I looked at the hoop, then the ball, and closed my eyes. I took in a deep breath and dribbled the ball a few times. *Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.* My heart was probably beating 1,000 beats per second, and I no longer heard the audience screaming to either encourage or distract me. I opened my eyes and took the shot. The ball hit right behind the backboard, swirled around the rim for a bit, and. . . . *swish!* It went in.

Eyes all open wide, students and teachers looked at me with amazement. One guy from the bleachers yelled, “Oh my God! That girl just made the free throw!” Then everyone began to cry in surprise, “OOOOOOOH!”

I have never felt so proud. Exhaling with relief, I stood there while my teammates patted my back and my arms to demonstrate their gratitude. “We just won the game!” On the side, I saw those guys and girls who had bullied me giving me the “so what?” look, rolling their eyes at me. But at this time, I cared less. I felt like the bomb diggity!

My temporary fame and pride eradicated over a few weeks. Slowly but suddenly, the Class of 2005’s culmination had arrived. Along with my choir, I sang a few good-bye songs and finally received my culmination certificate. I was not sad, but I had cried. “*Going to build a mountain from a little hill. Going to build a mountain least I hope I will. Going to build a mountain. I’m going to build it high. I don’t know how I’m going to do it. All I’m going to do is try.*” Singing the Monkee’s “Gonna Build A Mountain” helped me finally realize that I was going to do my best to succeed in junior high and start over with new friends. Memories here at Hoover St. Elementary School were too dramatic, and I wanted peace.

My mother had brought me roses and surprised me with a cute purse. I even awkwardly took my culmination pictures with two guys from my class, but at least I smiled. Stepping out of the auditorium, and out of the school’s campus that I had spent six years in, I looked back at the red bricks of Hoover St. Elementary and waved goodbye. Tears ran down my face while I had flashbacks as a kindergartener finger painting with primary colors and as a culminated fifth grader without any friends. I felt attached to this place where I countlessly spent hours learning English, practicing Math, drawing pictures, experimenting Science, and reading History. But at the same time, I cried because I felt pathetic.. In a few months, I was going to be a 6th grader, a scrub at John Burroughs Middle School. What will my future be? A smart girl with many friends and Miss Popular? Or a No One always having to feel left behind?