

A Banana

I tilt my head, face pressed close to the bathroom mirror. I have the faucet running for ambient noise, and to pretend I'm doing something other than studying my face. It's amazing how many shapes and appearances it can take. From this angle, I decide that I like the sharpness of my cheekbones and the way my thick, black hair falls to my shoulders with a subtle waviness. My eyes have a sultry mysteriousness to them. For twenty-four, I am hot.

I tilt my head again. My skin becomes jaundiced and ashy. My eyes are brown and beady in their alien slits.

I splash my face with water.

"You have a very nice nose," Angie had said on our first date. I had taken her to a ramen restaurant: she'd never had ramen before, real ramen, not the instant-boiled-water type, and it was just about the time it was becoming a popular food in California. The waiter spoke to me in Japanese, staring at me expectantly until I said, in English, "sorry, I don't..." Still, I tried to order with the menu's phoneticized Japanese words instead of the English ones, though, pronouncing *shoyu* as *show-you*, which made Angie laugh.

"Does this happen to you a lot?" she asked.

"At Japanese restaurants, yeah they assume," I said, adjusting my grip on the chopsticks.

"I thought your parents spoke Japanese."

"My mother never taught me how to. My dad doesn't speak it at all. They both grew up in the States."

I was used to it though. I was ten when they placed me on the other side of the cafeteria, alone, to represent the “Asian Countries.” I’d never been to Japan: I played football and tennis. In the summer, I shot BB guns in the backyard. My family celebrated Christmas and the Fourth of July religiously, the latter being the town’s biggest holiday.

The other kids hadn’t necessarily been mean to me. No, in fact, I was popular among my classmates. The Pokemon cards we treasured were as foreign to me as they were to them. When the children said, “ching, chang, chong,” laughing and pretending to be Chinamen—not actually Chinese, but a blanket term for all Asians—I laughed alongside them. They weren’t talking about me. They honest-to-God weren’t. I was an American.

“You’re a banana,” someone once said. *Twinkie*. I shrugged. I didn’t know of any better way to put it.

The faucet is still running, hot water beginning to fog up the mirror. Angie was right, my nose does have subtle proportions to it. It feels like the right size for a nose, my nose. At one point I had wanted a new nose, had begged my parents for a nose-job at thirteen. They laughed at me. I thought that was what I wanted. Because my face had no texture, flat and slab-like.

I turn my head again. The slab-face of Easter Island returns.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Angie is standing in the bathroom doorway. I straighten up and look towards her. She once admitted to me that she thought she was hot—hotter than most—and somehow this surreptitious narcissism has made me love her even more. Dressed to go out, she looks like a million bucks.

“Oh, nothing. Washing up before we leave,” I say, turning the faucet off.

She moves next to me, and the two of us look at our reflection for a moment. Then, she tilts her head upwards and kisses me on the cheek.

“We have to leave in a few minutes if we want to meet your parents on time. I’m going to put my shoes on,” she says, grabbing my hand.

“Okay,” I say, letting my fingers trail off hers as she leaves the room. “I’ll be right out.”

I look at myself in the mirror one last time. It’s been an odd experience growing up looking different from everyone else. It’s been odd not really knowing where I fit. I’m a normal, middle-class guy, but for the longest time, I felt like my body didn’t reflect that. So, it’s been odd learning to feel comfortable in my skin. I wouldn’t change my appearance for the world, but the truth is, when they called me a banana, I wondered why I couldn’t be a person instead.