

Bahay Ko
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When I was in fifth grade, I was bad at sports, but great at memorizing facts. I was not good at making friends, but really good at 5th grade math. When one math test hadn't gone as well as the others, a boy, Bobby Griffin, said to me: "Melissa, it's okay. You're Asian on the outside, but it's okay because you're white on the inside."

Fifth-grade Melissa couldn't unpack all the layers of that comment, but one thing stuck: It was okay to be white, and not okay to be anything else.

Now I want you all to imagine my home town of Abington, Massachusetts, a suburb an hour south of here. I was raised in a town that was 97.48% "white alone." No, I didn't make up that number or that category. I looked up the census data. When I was growing up, there were a whopping 71 Asians in Abington, and my mother was one of them.

My mother is from Guinobatan, Albay, Philippines. A small city about a 12-hour bus ride from the capital of Manila. My father is from literally the most Irish town in America — according to census data — Scituate, Massachusetts. He spent four years stationed in the Philippines while serving in the Navy, and that's where he met my mother.

We spoke English at home. My father never learned Tagalog, the language of the Philippines. We ate typical "American" food, and spent holidays with my Dad's family here in

the United States. Most of the time, we seemed similar to every other household in Abington.

I remember asking my parents why they didn't teach me Tagalog. I got a rotation of answers: "We don't want it to distract you." "We wanted you to fit in at school." "You don't need it. I left the Philippines for a reason." Eventually, I stopped asking.

Fast forward to college, and I'm in the most diverse environment of my life. I see not only other Asians, but even other Filipinos. But I felt an exclusion I wasn't expecting. Here, I didn't feel Filipino *enough* to belong.

My sophomore year I joined the Filipino club on a J-term trip. It was my first trip to the Philippines — my first trip anywhere outside the U.S. — that I was old enough to remember. I spent almost 48 hours flying, and eventually touched down in Manila. The sun was bright and every person I saw had a smile. Manila felt warm in every sense of the word.

There were things about the Philippines that *had* been a part of my life all along. I already loved chicken adobo. I knew that the bundle of sticks tied together in the corner of my uncle's kitchen was actually a broom. I knew that no one uses a knife on a regular basis, and instead just a fork and spoon. There were moments on that trip when I felt at home.

But most of the time I didn't feel Filipino enough. I couldn't speak Tagalog. I tried to slip in some "opos" and "salamats," instead of pleases and thank yous. I asked for the bathroom in

broken phrases. I learned very quickly that, as soon as I opened my mouth, I was an outsider again.

I was angry. I was angry that people make assumptions about my identity because I look a certain way, and angry that I don't have the cultural capital to legitimize myself. I was angry at Abington for not letting me feel American enough. I was angry at the Philippines for making me feel too American. I was, and still am, angry at my parents for not helping me find a middle ground.

So, I'm learning Tagalog. I'm watching Filipino television dramas, reading Filipino newspapers, and even sing Tagalog songs in the shower. My friends from Manila are incredibly supportive and speak to me in Tagalog so I can practice. My friends here are getting used to the small phrases that have become a part of my everyday conversation.

I'm not just learning a language. I am building a bridge to a place, both emotional and physical, where I want to be. When I can finally communicate, I think I'll feel like I finally belong.

My vocabulary is limited, my pronunciation is horrendous, but this language is my key to a culture that I have longed for, and a self-confidence I am building. *Kaya ko matuto sa Tagalog.* I can learn Tagalog. *Ako ay Amerikana at Filipina.* I am American and Filipino. *Mahahanap ko ang bahay ko.* I will find my home.