

Flailing Identities

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“A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents’ culture. The third culture kid builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the third culture kids life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of the same background, other third culture kids.” - Ruth Van Reken

When asked “Where are you from? No, like, where are you *really* from?” I can’t help but wonder a different question. What truly makes a person who they are? Many of us have heard the microaggressive comments from people who don’t understand the difference between home and ethnicity and why those aren’t mutually exclusive. You know the ones, those who ask questions about our identity, as if we are confused. I think it’s the phrasing of the question that really gets me the most, the “*really* from,” because if you want to know my ethnicity, just ask, and if you want to know the town I grew up in, just ask. While it’s almost laughable to be interrogated in this way, using questions you’ve never and most likely will never be asked, it’s also minimizing and invalidating of my identity.

Take me, for example, I’m Lebanese, Ghanaian and German, both of my parents were immigrants. I was raised in a separated home, where almost all of my culture of what makes me who I am, came from my mom’s side. She was born in Ghana, where her mother, my *teta*, is from. She spent eleven years of her childhood there before moving to Lebanon, where her father, my *jidou*, calls home. After that, they moved to Lebanon, and why they moved *towards* the bombs during the civil war is beyond me. My mother spent some of her teenage years in Lebanon, before the bombs of the Civil War destroyed their homes along with their sense of security, causing her family to flee to Europe. I like to call this the Nader-Tabbica Diaspora of February 1989. First they journeyed to Cyprus, by boat and then to Switzerland. After that, they did a stint in Germany by train and finally, in 1990 flew to London, giving ‘trains planes and automobiles,’ new meaning. It is in London and other parts of Europe that most of my family has stayed. An exception being my mother, who, thanks to her independent spirit, the same spirit the war almost stripped her of, went to America with the man who would later be my father.

“One thing to note about the civil war is that it wasn’t constant conflict, rather a mixed experience of surreal times of “calmness” mixed with period of bloody calamity.” My mother shares that during the times where she and her younger siblings would sit in corners of buildings, surrounded by sounds and vibrations of bombs exploding, it created a pain that will never leave. A fear that causes you to hope and wish that God will hear you now. My mother writes poetry, she has repurposed and reclaimed this pain and puts into words what her mouth cannot always

express. After teaching for years, something I saw to be so powerful that I followed suit, she has gone back to school yet again, this time for an MFA. She's been able to share her story in multiple literary journals, giving hope to those who've been in a similar position as her.

That I can tell firecrackers from gunfire. That I can only distinguish bombs from thunder when a whistle precedes the thunder. But that I think every thunder is a bomb falling and That I drop and look for shelter. That I am embarrassed that I jump at a loud noise. That I know I will not die as long as I can relive memories where I lived through death. That I know to open windows to avoid glass shrapneling the house. That the building in Lebanon did not have a basement. That I know how to fill sandbags. That I know what they are for. That the buildings on the street with sandbags are the ones with sons called to fight. That I know when school will be canceled. That I remember we forget to protect ourselves from a bomb landing in the elevator shaft. That we assume if it happens we are meant to die. That men can cry. That I remember filling the sandbags that block the lobby entrance. That the tenants of the building crawl on the ground on mattresses wait for bombardment. That I want to live. That I remember the warning on the radio the day before. That we are warned.

The journey that I've taken with my identity since I was a child has been a long one. From comments to my sister, Yasmine, and I about 9/11 and how we're terrorists. From being labeled as Mexican without ever even taking the time to ask if we're something other than an assumption. A father telling his own daughter that she has a 'big-arab nose', and calling every middle-easterner in a movie a 'terrorist' or 'towel-head.' Desperate to visit the countries of the culture of my family, to strengthen my identity, to not feel like some hitchhiking traveler stuck between *almost* and *not enough*, my sister and I had to fight against the voices telling us that part of us wasn't valid, important or beautiful. The beauty in this pain though, is that I am a more sympathetic, gentle, compassionate person for it. And now, I hear stories from my youngest brother who is in 1st grade, of children criticizing his cold lunch, (as if hot lunch is really that amazing. You can keep your square cut fake cheese pizza, thank you very much) because it's something they've never seen. When they said *ew*, my brother told them *you're missing out, you should try it before saying ew, it's really good*. Why he isn't ashamed like I was can be explained with a variety of factors. The strongest one being that he isn't being raised in a broken home. My mother can instill the confidence, pride and culture to the fullest extent. There is no tension, no confusion. My carefully well thought out childhood approach to children teasing me had always been to cover vegetables in ranch and to throw it across lunchroom tables. This would result in a suspension, which I would argue was worth it, but his casualty-free way worked better.

Groundnut Soup, Kinkeh and Fried Fish with Shitoh, Waakye, Fattoush, Maamoul, Kibbeh, Bamyeh, Loubieh b'zeit, Fasolia and Falafel. Such sweet aromas constantly filled the house,

citing my ancestors of whom sometimes I feel detached from, as if I don't have a connection to them. Roasted plantain and roasted peanuts are treats for me; when the mixing of oils and flavors creates a scent that wafts to me, I am reminded of my culture, the same one, but experienced in a different way. In Ghana, you're greeted with those scents of peanuts and plantains. Growing up my mother and her sisters would enjoy plantains which were sold to them on the side of the street from vendors. They tell me stories of everyone always having, selling or eating food, food being carried on heads, food being carried in bags, food even being sold through car windows. Food, food, food, all the time.

My teta - my mother's, mother, my namesake - she passed away last year. My mom hasn't gotten over it and grieves every day, that she wasn't there to say goodbye. That she can't call her up when she forgets a recipe and ask for the missing step anymore. She takes her grief out on us and complains that we don't know how to cook our favorite meals. And because she's right - which she, contrary to her popular belief, isn't always - I ask her to teach me. To teach me how to cook, but I procrastinate that more often than not. But also to teach me how to love unconditionally, how to think critically, how to write poetry. And although I'd be lucky to have half the eloquence and power she pours into her writing, I give it my best shot.

A melting pot, mixed with spices, I watch my mother cook. My tongue has been watered down, and the spices disrupt my taste buds. I am the one asking to change the meal, who feels uncomfortable. A table still set, napkins in my lap. My ancestors whose name I do not know, take up the empty seats. They watch me in anguish and despair, while I stay farther back, I sit on the stop shelf with the rest of the spices my mother doesn't use when she cooks for me. Unused and closeted for society's sake, a decision perpetuated by me.

My mother used to smoke before she had me as a child, she quit, cold turkey, but in no way was it easy for her to do. And when I was born, before my sister Yasmine was even a thought, she smoked again before giving it up forever. I have this memory, I'm in our home and my mom had just went outside for a smoke and to talk to a friend. I was a strong willed tyrant of a child so I saw an opportunity and I seized it. With those five minutes of freedom I decided to dial 911 and then to quickly hang up. I thought that was the end of my *awesome* prank, but I was not aware cops will still come knocking at your door if you call them, and she was not too pleased with me once the red and blue lights started flashing outside. To this day, she says that when she smells a cigarette she can tell which brand it is. When I ask her if she misses it, she says no but if she were to try it today she would probably become immediately addicted to the fullest extent. Dirt, soil, chickens and their coop; if my mother or her sisters smells chicken or sees pigeons they are reminded of Ghana. I try to do the math on how often they must think of their home, as they live in big cities, like London, where Pigeons basically call all the shots. The difference between the

home smells and the cigarette smells are that the latter does not incite me to dial 911 and the smells of home don't exactly inspire my mother to immediately get on a plane to visit Ghana.

In 7th grade we were assigned a project on a country that we would want to visit. We planned our itinerary, schedule, places we would visit, and follow up with general research about the country. I did mine on Lebanon. I asked to visit Lebanon pretty regularly after that presentation but I would continuously be greeted with one of a few of her staple mom-responses. "*It's too dangerous still*" or, "*You're not missing much*" or the ever simple, always popular, "*No.*" It's not that I can't go now, I know I'm an adult and have a passport of my own. Though the one time I joked about going on my own, my mother didn't hesitate to remind me how clumsy, forgetful, absent minded and overly-trusting I am, so I would surely die, something straight out of 'Taken'. However, part of the experience of traveling to Lebanon or Ghana would be to go with my family. Seeing it through their eyes, living for a second in their home, on the streets that have been bombed time and time and time again, eat from the streets they'd eat on, go to their favorite corner shops, visit relatives I haven't met but surely will connect with. I don't just want to go, to *go*.

Lebanon has existed for at least 7,000 years. For my jidou it's been 66 years, my mother for 44, and myself for 20. All three of us have experienced, or know *Lebanon* as something else. It means something to each of us in ways we can't put into words, and then there are similarities that bond us in ways we can't explain.

When they think of Lebanon, the memories are met with the scents of cinnamon and fried garlic. Lots of it. Growing up, my mother and her siblings would hang out with their teta Abla. In fact, they learned to cook the meals they taught me how to make, from her and their mom. My auntie leans over and tells me that she loved spending time with teta Abla because she would feed her, and she likes free food. In Lebanon, when they were kids, they would go on picnics and since they'd be surrounded by Pine trees, they would pick up the nuts had been shed, scoop out the seed and eat it whilst on their picnic. They would put it in their rice and cook it so it would soften and expand. In another way they'd also put these pine nuts in an oven for about 10 minutes to roast them to perfection. I've never had such luxury of eating food literally off the trees. The closest I can think of is when my home at in a small cul-de-sac named Curtis Place, where we had berries growing on a bush outside. However, I'm pretty sure they were poisonous, or maybe they were just extremely sour; same difference. I guess we also had a ginormous Pine tree which shed needles horribly during the fall. Except in my case of these only thing I was able to do with them was to rake them off the lawn as punishment for throwing attitude at my mother. Which was often. So often that, honestly, they should probably thank me for keeping our yard so well kept.

My home is deeply connected with my culture and my ethnicity. Despite having not traveled to Lebanon or Ghana, it does not make my *home* any less intertwined with them. They were my mother's, cousins, aunties uncles' home. They've made what I know home to be, what it is. With them, they brought their cultures of Ghana and Lebanon with them, they integrated it into my life without me even noticing. In a way, I've never been without them and truly never will.

Growing up I was plagued with thoughts and voices, both external and internal, which were compounded by my dad's constant criticism and excessive punishments. In turn, I became filled with questions and doubts, rage and sadness. I was convinced that self destruction was the only way to cope. I couldn't talk to my mother during this point in my life because I had developed a complex that my mother was the anti-christ and because during every negative situation, my father would say I was "just like her," I resented the idea of ever being anything like her. Nothing brings me more shame than to admit that during my most impressionable age, I took this anger, this feeling of helplessness and anger towards my mother and put it into action. I scrubbed the sink drain with her toothbrush and then cleaned any visibly remaining *treats* from the sink so she'd never notice she was ingesting literal scum from the sink. She still found out years later. Mothers seem to find things out one way or another.

My mothers forgiveness for the hurt I felt towards her came from a place of pure love, a love I hope to share with my children someday. I was not deserving of it, I will never make right those moments of my childhood but I will continue to try. She even apologized for not noticing the pain the divorce had caused me, for the pain my father had been causing me and for not trusting her gut when she felt like things were off with me. They say secrets make you sick and it wasn't until my secrets of self destruction made me sick enough that I had no choice but to ask for help. It was then I realized my mother would always be the first person I would go to, my shoulder to cry on, the person who has and will always have my best interest at heart. That moment and every moment moving forward shifted our relationship completely.

Everyday I am thankful my first home was my mother. That my source of strength is more than just my source. Family is an incredible gift that literally keeps on giving because you'll always feel a certain undeniable connection between you and this person, despite perhaps having never met them. In the way they move, in the way they talk, in their face, you will see your family and relatives and years of an unbreakable bond. It can only be described as a sense of familiarity that always stays with you. You'll smell your home in places you least expect it, so do you really need to physically travel to your place of origin to recognize it? Do you need a boarding pass to travel to your country? I don't think so. Because despite my many attempts to reject her at times growing up, my motherland has always claimed you, gently waiting for me to take a different trip; a journey towards acceptance.

“Maybe it’s like family” my aunt tells me, “you love it, but you hate it.” Perhaps it’s the same way we feel about our hometown. We hate it growing up, then when you get older, probably in your last semester of highschool, you love it and begin to miss it. Or perhaps, it’s the way you feel towards your own mother whilst growing up, saying horrible things you only wish you could take back, until you realize she’s the only person who has always seen you as a whole person. Similarly, when you’re a child or teenager sometimes you are ashamed of your culture, you want to blend in, you want to be friends with the girls who organize their friend groups together for Halloween costume plannings. Until you realize, trying to scrub away your identity, lighten your skin, bleaching your hair, in order to please others never works. (I never did any of those things, thank God my mother never allowed me to). At the end of the day, those girls still won’t like you and you’ll end up not liking yourself either. As you become older, the world becomes smaller and your differences become an exciting way to instill a sense of pride in yourself, regardless of having to answer questions like, “where are *really* from?”

So when you finally find it again; that nostalgia of comfort, contentedness, satisfying your longing to be home - whether you find it in a person, in a food, in a face, in a smell - when you find it again, everything clicks, and you feel as if you’ve traveled home again.