My First Friend

 When Megan walked into the room I was immediately taken aback by how pretty she was. She’s the type of pretty you’d find yourself staring at. She’s the kind of girl someone could fall in love with.

One of our first conversations was about “weebs”. She talked about how she loved anime and how she was a bit of a “weeb”. This term was completely foreign to me, but she was just so cool I simply smiled and acted as if I understood her world. I would go along with what she said because I was nervous.

She was my first friend who was not white, and I didn’t want to mess it up. I had lived for 17 years with only white friends.

I met Megan at The School of The New York Times summer program. She was my roommate but would soon become my best friend.

Megan was proud to be Asian and always spoke highly of her hard-working parents. Once while we were talking she told me about how she wishes she was better at speaking Chinese like her sister, but abruptly paused and asked “since your parents are Hispanic, do you speak Spanish?”.

I just said “yes”, but it was a loaded question.

Rarely by choice would I speak Spanish in public; both my parents spoke broken English, so I exclusively spoke Spanish with them. Typo-filled texts to my parents were among the few things I wrote in Spanish. I was always a strong Spanish speaker especially compared to my other cousins who were in the United States, but I never found pride in being a Spanish speaker primarily because it rarely helped my life in America. The first few years of elementary school, it was clear that my English literacy level was “below average”. I was automatically enrolled in the English Learners Program then promptly tested out as soon as I realized the “program” was just a room with other non-English speakers. At the time I cared not for English or spelling at all, I just wanted to be in the regular classes with all my friends. I wished so badly that my parents could read me English like those of my peers, instead, this was a challenge I battled alone. Thus began my resentment for my language and soon it would erode my relationship with my parents as well.

Every time my soccer team won a game my parents would run to congratulate me with the distinctive bottomless love that only parents obtain for their children. But, I despised every second of it. Every word of encouragement was poisoned by the language they spoke. Deaf to their tenderness, I would painfully scorn them when we got home because they spoke Spanish in front of my all-white soccer team. How could they?

When Megan described her desire to know more Chinese I just thought of all the times I scorned my parents for embarrassing me. For a while I tried to bypass how my hatred for Spanish could have made them feel, only to admit they would remember every vowel of hate that left my mouth.

The first night in my dorm I googled “weebs”. The Urban Dictionary describes “weebs” as males who are obsessed with anime and Japanese culture. I looked over at Megan. She was scrolling on her phone with her headphones in.

I wondered if she knew how much I envied her.

Kylie lived two doors down from Megan and I. She dressed and looked as if she was a model for Urban Outfitters; chic yet trendy. Kylie was a true city girl at heart and it felt as if at only 17, she had mastered NYC. Having traits most girls dream of, Kylie was breathtaking. Her clothing was always bright and never bland. Everything about her was uniquely hers. She had a certain confidence that radiated with every move she made.

This was a stark contradiction to how I had been living. As I grew from childhood and into my teenage years I mastered an acute awareness of what made me different and ways to combat them. Constantly focusing on ways to make me fit in every way imaginable, I would only wear what my friends wore. Vineyard Vines and Lulemon Leggings were my versions of being “white”. The same shade of BB cream that was perfectly lighter than my natural tone was delicately placed upon my skin. Every morning before I left for my predominantly white high school I would glance in the mirror as if it were my own personal ritual, analyzing every element of perceived imperfection. All the markings of being “American” were there but when I looked at myself as a whole, I was confused.

 I met Kylie through Megan and the first time I saw her I assumed she was in the fashion program, but this couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“Hi, I’m Kylie, I am in the United Nations and political program” she grinned as if she was accepting me. I quickly responded, “Hi, I’m Bianca and I’m in the film program”.

That day, Kylie, Megan, and I were all on our way to get ramen. As I was walking next to them I couldn't help but notice how they were both whole individuals. They were not carbon copies of their environment like I was, and they certainly didn’t try to be. From time to time, I would look at the two seemingly perfect girls and wondered if I was even acceptable enough to be friends with either of them. Even though we were all minorities, it seemed like they just did it better than me. They never hid their skin or who they were.

For most of my life, I hated my skin. But, every year my family would go on a beach vacation in Mexico. Each year I was always incredibly adamant about wearing sunscreen, but one day while we were on the beach I had foolishly forgotten my sunscreen. Unaware of my tarnished skin, I walked into the bathroom to get ready for dinner with my family that evening. As I looked in the mirror, I saw my once delicate light skin was darkened by the sun and I couldn’t help but cry. I was completely petrified. I knew I would be flying home in just a few days but I had no idea what to do. I decided to stay inside for the rest of the vacation in order to let my skin go back to its once lighter tone. It felt as if I had lost a battle. But this was nothing new, it was as if my life was one long war to be “white”, and I was losing. Deep down I knew it wasn’t right to hate who I was, but at the time it felt obligatory.

The following weekend Kylie texted me, “Let’s go shopping”. I quickly replied “Yes!!!”. I begged Megan to come to avoid it being awkward, but she was spending the day with her aunt. I admired Kylie in a way, and with the absence of Megan, Kylie would be able to see how boring I was.

Rummaging through my clothes I was attempting to find something nice to wear. In a fit of frustration, all I could find was a pair of Lululemon shorts and a black tank top. I looked in the mirror and knew I couldn’t wear this in front of Kylie. I considered canceling but before I could Kylie was in my room. She was dressed to perfection and scanned me up and down and said “Awe you look like a white girl”.

 Knowing she was right I simply laughed.

On the train to Soho, Kylie pleaded that she pick an outfit for me. In order to please her, I said “Okay”.
 I waited in the dressing room while Kylie ran around trying to find clothes. She brought me a skirt, a headband, and an oversized T-shirt. Initially, I thought the combo was horrendous but when I put it on I couldn’t help but smile.

When I walked out, Kylie announced, “see I’m always right”.

 Later that evening we met up with Megan and went to Central Park. We talked for hours about everything; boys, the conflicts of being a minority, high school drama, the struggles of being a woman, and things I wouldn’t even consider telling my friends back home.

Megan is Chinese, Kylie is Black, and I am Latina. Maybe it was luck or maybe it was the quotas the school had to reach to ensure diversity, but either way, this was what I needed. The more I learned about the girls the more I learned how little I knew about myself and my own culture. Without Kylie or Megan, I would’ve never realized I was fighting the wrong war. All these battles to become white were worthless, because I didn’t need to be “white”.

The first day I met Megan she told me she was “white-washed”. I googled white-washed in the Urban Dictionary later that night; “A derogatory term used to describe a minority who has assimilated with western society”.

As I read the screen, I noticed I wasn’t fighting a war at all. I was “whitewashed”.