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                                        **EMBRACING THE IDENTITY CRISIS.**

Located on top of a small green mountain, our school hostel had a lot of tall glass windows. There were bunk beds and I slept on the upper bed, near the room’s entry door on the right-hand side. I had a view of Kanchenjunga from my bed. The sight of the mountain, gleaming white and covered in a light cloud blanket, was beautiful every morning. I was 10 years old, when I was admitted into a Tibetan boarding school in Darjeeling, India. I did not have to deal with issues of identity because we all talked the same language, we all looked the same and our beliefs were the same as well.

Depending on the weather, our days began with a hike in the mountains or with yoga or exercise for an hour every day. This time of the day was fun because we could go outside the school compound and get some fresh air. We had only 1 yoga teacher appointed for hundreds of students. Our teacher used to do certain yoga which involved closing our eyes. It was a perfect time to skip class because he could not see us. During that time, we would go outside, play a little while, then come back and wait outside the door until he again closed his eyes for the next pose.

 I remember, I was sitting on a thin old mat close to the entry door. One of our naughty and funny friends named Tsomo was able to skip the class, but when she came back in the middle of our yoga class, she asked me through the door, “Are the teacher's eyes closed?”

I answered in a low voice, “Yes.” However, our teacher saw her stepping into the room, and he said aloud on the microphone, “Hey you! Come up on stage. Sit here and do yoga beside me.” We knew that she hated doing yoga. While sitting up on stage, she was supposed to do a position where you lay down with both legs straight up on the wall, but her legs were constantly moving on to the sides. She was doing some different and weird poses. We had a good laugh at that time.

The kids at our hostel were from different parts of India, Nepal, and Bhutan, but we only spoke Tibetan language because all the kids were Tibetan. I was from South India and my best friend Dolkar was from Bhutan. One is above India’s north side, and the other is in the south. On graduation day, when everyone wished each other good luck for the future and said goodbye at the same time, her tears were rolling down and she said to me that, “It will be hard to see each other again after we leave the school, since our homes are thousands of miles away from each other. Come visit me if you ever plan a vacation.” It was our last day at school.

After I graduated, I was unprepared for the challenges I had to face regarding my identity and my physical appearance. Although I was born in India, people would ask me, “Where are you from?” Or say to me “you aren’t Indian!” because my face does not look Indian.

This incident occurred when I was walking along a street to my sister's house in New Delhi, a city in North India. A group of men were biking by and one of them called me, “Small eyes.” I had never felt such an insult before, this was the first incident that I started to question myself about my looks. I got so angry that I kicked his bike, causing him to fall off and suffer injuries to his knees. As soon as I reached my home, I told my mom about my experience at the time, and she replied, “Ignore them since they are not familiar with our faces and most Indian people do not have knowledge about the Tibetan being refugees here.” Maybe she preferred to ignore it, or maybe she had too many of these comments on her look that it was normal for her, but for me it was something I never thought of.

             Few weeks later, after I graduated, I went to Delhi to take a 6-month coding course. In India, people often use auto rickshaws. An auto rickshaw is a three wheeled motorized vehicle.

When I was taking an auto rickshaw to go to the train station, the driver asked for more money than the actual rate. The driver said, “Ekso pachas lagega,'' which means it will cost 150 rupees to go to the train station. When I asked, “Why?” He replied, “Aaht km hain yahan se train station jaana,” meaning the train station is 8km from where I was staying. While that was not true as I knew it was only 3-4 km away.

There were so many unpleasant incidents that I had to face because I did not look like an Indian. Every time I take a taxi or auto rickshaw, I end up in an argument with the driver for asking for more money. Even for the registration of any license, they ignore us unless we give them some bribe, or just to get a regular service like plumping at home, they would always ask for more than usual charge from me. They assume I was a tourist who does not know much about the area’s rules and regulations. After many unpleasant experiences, I began to accept the fact that I would never be able to stop them from discriminating against me, no matter how much I try. I realized that I could not fit in there.

In India, in my mind, the word “Refugee'' was written on my forehead. Nevertheless, when I moved to the United States from India 6 years ago, I was struggling with identity issues even more. Some nights when I lay in bed trying to sleep, I ask myself these questions which troubled me and made me think of who I am.  Since my parents fled Tibet, am I a refugee? Since I was born in India, am I an Indian? Probably Tibetan since my ancestors were Tibetans? or Immigrants, just like how the United States recognizes us, or American?

After a month of arriving in NYC I started working for a laser company situated in midtown in New York City. At my workplace, I came across some amazing people who have mixed ethnicities. It was on a slow day at work when I was having lunch with my coworker Nahid at our go-to lunch spot called Market Craves. Her dad was Portuguese, and mom was Indian, but she was born in Iran. So, I just asked her casually what has been her journey like? if she was experiencing any trouble finding her identity within? Her response was, “We are defined by our values, our upbringing, and the things we care about. That's when we know who we are.” I shared with her my identity crisis for years that has been troubling me so much and it's affecting what I do and what I want to do. She said, “Well, some things you may figure it out but some things I don't think you ever will. But with time you will come out different, probably better.” I am thankful that I was able to see the positive side of life with her help. Otherwise, I would still be stressed out trying to find solutions to everything about myself which was not possible.

 Nevertheless, as time went by, after meeting people hailing from different cultures and ethnicities, I realized how fortunate I am to live in a city of diversity where it's very common for people to have backgrounds that are very different. I thought to myself, either I live like this as a poor girl, who always tries to find what's within, or just accept myself as how I am and see the positive side about it and do things that make me happy. I can say that I am learning, it's a journey.