

Would I Be Happier if I Wasn't Asian?

*My Winnie-the-Pooh diary was the only
place my feelings were allowed to exist.*



by Ysabelle Calahi

My Winnie-the-Pooh diary was the only place my feelings were allowed to exist without consequences. At eight years old, I didn't have the language to explain why my chest felt heavy or why silence felt safer than speaking, so I let the pages hold it for me. As I got older, the feelings I thought were tucked away in this diary started showing up more. Growing up Filipino in a predominantly White country meant that what was traditional in my home was not so normal. When confiding to my White friends, their confusion reminded me that my life was something they could never understand. With my Asian friends, we didn't need explanations, just shared glances. We recognized the same shame, same comparisons, same quiet fear of never being enough. Obedience, excellence, and perfection were expected of us, even before we understood what failure meant.

Asian immigrant children are forced to face our biggest opponent in a duel, before we ever learn the rules. You turn around and realize your opponent is familiar, someone who was supposed to be watching from the sidelines. I was raised as a Filipina woman who must obey her parents, succeed academically to bring pride and security to the family, and look elegant while doing so. Happiness, I learned, was something to be earned. Love was conditional. And before I was old enough to question it, I was already wondering: would I be happier if I wasn't Asian?

Early on in my life, my parents began to throw blows at my academics.

"Anak, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"A doctor!" I say.

I knew this was just my parents' dream and not

mine, yet I didn't feel strong enough to face this truth and them. From the moment my parents showed interest in my future, I wanted to excel academically to secure my spot at a medical school and a place in my parents' hearts. Playtime was now study time, cartoons were documentaries, and music was mnemonics of the times tables—I only kept going because of the love and praise I received from my parents and teachers. But, fun started looking a little different, and it became a chore.

Once my grades started to look like unfinished jobs, my praise and achievements followed suit. I averaged out academically; I started to burn out. I ran purely on the validation of others because it was the only thing I was loved for; my identity was destroyed.

Who was I without my excelling grades? My parents engraved into me the belief that their love is only earned when a favor is done for them.

The little bit of playtime

you receive must be sacrificed to be better. A child's self-esteem is easily destroyed due to conditional love. My parents' natural instinct to worry manifested as conditional love tied to achievements. My only job was to do well in school, but what would be the point of it all if I did poorly? Deep down, I knew my true dreams, but it was too unrealistic to my family, especially with their sacrifice. So, my true dream remained just that, a dream.

From behind, they swung with expectations of beauty. Pale skin, a slim figure, large eyes, and a small nose are admired. Papaya soap was strategically placed in the bathroom to whiten my skin; pinching the skin on my thighs told me how much less I would have to eat; and pinching the bridge of my nose helped it appear petite and pointy. Alone in the mirror, I learned how to inspect myself the way others would—finding flaws before anyone else would be able to spot them. Love already meant correction



Image by Freepik

to me, and my looks were no exception. Whenever I deviated from traditional looks and experimented with my identity, I was met with the spoken reality of "no one will love you like that" and "only a parent will be honest with you." If I was just smaller, lighter, and quieter, I'd be easier to love. If I was prettier, I wouldn't feel so alone. After some time, I became what appeared to be beautiful, yet I had never felt more disconnected from my own body. I mistook discipline for confidence and obedience for self-worth. Beauty became a new type of achievement, another way to earn approval rather than something to own within.

My parents did not raise me with cruelty, but rather with survival. The discipline I grew up with was inherited from the generations before me who learned that obedience meant safety and success meant survival. As a child, I didn't understand this. I played with my *ates* and *kuyas* (my older cousins) until the sun went down, fell asleep in the car a few times just for my *tito* to carry me inside, and I listened to my *titas* as they bought me pretty pink dresses. I always wondered why we couldn't stay with my cousins back in their old country, but my parents told me we were better off elsewhere: poverty was something they had worked hard to escape. Though they were right, love once felt heavier than money.

As I grew older, I began to understand the exhaustion behind their expectations. My parents left

everything they knew so I wouldn't have to struggle the way they did, and their fear of returning to that life ended up shaping the way they loved me. Their shouting became my alarm clock, and their stress was something I absorbed by being quiet, helpful, and small. Believing that love required sacrifice, I lost parts of myself trying to make their lives easier. Even now, I carry both gratitude and guilt—gratitude for the life they gave me, but guilt for wanting a life that feels like my own. Loving my parents meant holding both truths at once: that their pain shaped them, and that their love, though real, hurt me.

For a long time, I thought happiness meant winning the fight—meeting expectations, surviving pressure, becoming the person I was told to be. The truth is, I entered the ring before I understood what I was fighting for or why my opponent looked familiar. At eight years old, I didn't know how to name fear, shame, or longing; I only knew how to hide them between the pages of a Winnie-the Pooh-diary, where my feelings could exist without consequences.

I don't wonder anymore if I would be happier if I wasn't Asian. Instead, I wonder how different my childhood might have felt if I had been allowed to exist without earning love first. I haven't won the fight by defeating anyone. I've won it by stepping out of the ring long enough to listen to the child who was never allowed to speak and by finally letting her feelings exist—this time, without apology.

Ysabelle Calahi

I am a Filipina-British student writer and the eldest daughter of first-generation immigrants, currently navigating the complex landscape of cultural expectation and personal identity. Through my work, I explore the nature of growing up in a high-pressure environment, where discipline was the fertilizer and perfection was the only acceptable shape. Having spent years substituting playtime for academic excellence and hiding her true feelings in the pages of my Winnie-the-Pooh diary, I now write to give a voice to the child who was once forced to stay silent. My prose captures the delicate balance between the gratitude she feels for her parents' immense sacrifices and the quiet struggle to define a worth that isn't tied to achievement. Today, I am learning to step out of the "ring" of expectation, unlearning perfectionism, and finally allowing myself to bloom without apology.

