

I AM ENOUGH.

By: cm.s.t / Christian Patrick Michael, Age: 24, State of Residence: New York

“The easiest way to catch a fish is with your hands.” This was one of the first things my Nanay told me growing up. I wasn’t sure what to think of it at the time mainly because I was six. The thought of my 80-year-old, Filipino grandmother catching fish with her bare hands made me laugh. It became something I thought about at the most difficult points in my life growing up.

I was eight years old when I was called my first racial slur. I was sitting on the bus, reading a book when someone tapped me on the shoulder and called me a “chink.” Words like “chink,” “gook,” and “half-breed” began to be thrown my way casually as I grew up. I felt like I had been born with these words stamped on my forehead. For the longest time, I wanted to believe I could blend in with the other kids. I had relatively light skin and I played baseball, the most American sport in existence. The words are what separated me from them. It was for that reason that I didn’t grow up with a lot of friends. I spent my childhood with my hands in my pockets, watching the fish swim by.

Growing up, my cousins lived down the street. My mom wanted us to be close to family as we grew up to not lose our Filipino roots. We spent time at their house for holiday feasts. My earliest memories are of my uncle roasting a pig on a spit in their backyard. It was in these times we would celebrate our culture. Half the table would be filled with rice, lumpia, dinuguan, lechon, chicken adobo, or whatever Filipino dish was made that day. The other half of the table would be filled with baked ziti, cheeseburgers, hot dogs, chicken parmigiana, and meatballs. We

celebrated everything with our culture split into even halves, yet fully loving each other. I didn't have a lot of friends growing up, but my life felt full because of the family I had.

"You will be great, because of the blood that runs through your veins. I promise." This was something my Nanay would say a lot. It made me believe I was destined for something. Like I could crush meteors with my hands or capture stars in a jar. She told me of a world where the streets were alive. A place where during monsoon season, people were crazy enough to be thankful for disaster. They would ride their boats or feel blessed for the surplus of water. Nanay looked at the rain with a happiness I eventually began to understand. Especially when I finally visited the Philippines.

A 26-hour flight seems like 2 weeks to a twelve year kid whose only real thoughts were about video games and sports. The moment I stepped off the plane and into the humid air, I felt like I belonged. Even in a place where I didn't speak the language. We were picked up from the airport by my mom's best friend, my cousin who visited us once in America. After the car ride from the airport, we arrived at the apartment complex where my mom's family all grew up. Everything about this area in Manila felt alive. Running down to the street to get taho or a bag of hot pandesal for breakfast. There were cars on the street, but most people walked everywhere. We toured the country with my family members, and it felt like a new world. When I came back to America, I was happy to have found a second place to call home.

I was thirteen years old when Nanay died. I remember screaming for an endless period, watching as a part of me evaporated. A connection lost to stories of another time, carrying the few she told me deeply in my heart. We returned to the Philippines again only a year later. I watched as

people of my own blood appeared and told their stories. They spoke of what Nanay did for them, how she cared for them, protected them, and even in hard times made the best of it. The next five days were a blur, but the world kept moving. I went back to school on Monday wearing a jacket that looked like the Filipino flag with Nanay's rosary tucked in my backpack. Living to make Nanay proud and to keep our promise, that I will become great.

When Nanay was a young girl, she saw her brother swim across a wide river with rushing rapids every day. She asked him if she could do it alone, and he told her she was not strong enough. She couldn't take that for an answer. She jumped in and paddled with all her might, but the rapids whisked her away. Her brother swam across the river, picked her up, and carried her on his back to the other side. She almost died, but her brother had saved her. Nanay told me this was the day she understood, there was a difference between strength, intelligence, and common sense.

Anyone can be strong or intelligent, but developing common sense required life experience. Life experience wasn't something I had yet, but what I was so desperate to find.

I spent high school being told my intelligence came from my Asian blood, that I had an unfair advantage. My intelligence wasn't purely natural. Hard work and dedication were taught to be my best friends. I remember all the afternoons spent re-writing my textbooks more than once, re-doing math problems I already completed, and writing book reports for my mom during summer vacation. I remember spending lunchtime with stares from people who had never heard of our food and thought the names were too hard for them to pronounce. I decided to hide my intelligence behind sarcastic comments, humor, and self-degrading comments about myself toward my race. I was ashamed of my own intelligence because it just created a greater barrier

between the majority and myself. I compromised myself to survive. In these moments, I lost a part of myself by lying to the world. I wasn't sure if people truly liked me or this persona I created. When I was accepted into one of the best colleges in the state, multiple people asked how I had even gotten into the school that they had gotten rejected from. It struck a nerve for them, so I lied and said it was dumb luck. It was more than that, I was a refugee to my own mindset and this entrance to college was the time I thought I could try to free myself.

After choosing a majority Asian university, I was excited to meet people so similar to myself. There was one person who stood by me from the beginning, my Filipino friend from my hometown. After a few weeks of attending the school, we decided to check out the Filipino Student Organization. I was hopeful to engulf myself in what it means to be Filipino, which was something I wasn't 100% sure of. I went to a meeting with my friend surrounded by people who had experienced my culture, and wanted to share it with the world. We left the meeting and it was then that someone approached me alone, another Filipino guy.

“Hey, I saw you in there. We could always use more White guys here. Keeps us looking diverse.”

“Hi, sorry I'm actually half-Filipino.”

“And the other half is White? Listen, we don't need any half breeds here pretending they understand. We don't need you here. You're not Filipino or Asian, you're just some White guy who thought he could score resume points. Get lost half-breed, you're not even Asian enough.”

The guy walked away, hitting my biggest insecurity with a bullseye. I stood there, turning to see if anyone was around. The world was immersed in itself, and no one felt it shatter as I had. I walked home with my friend, but I couldn't find the words to tell him what happened. Instead I said the club wasn't for me. I'm sure you're wondering why I ran away. Why didn't I swim across the river and save myself? I thought this person was right. I wasn't Asian enough.

Life went on, but the idea stayed with me. I wasn't Asian enough to be a part of their group, but I could make my own group. A group made up of people with no regard for what they looked like and it all started with a ping-pong game. I made my first Asian friend in college after someone had told him about the half-Filipino who was unbeatable at ping-pong. He strolled down the stairs, confident he could beat me. On that day I had tried to be stylish and wore really tight jeans, so I lost the first three points. In a moment of unorthodox instinct, the pants came off and I played the rest of the game in my boxers. I won the game 11-3 and we ended up playing for hours. He told me that what I did was bold and he couldn't imagine another Asian guy doing something like that. The words were validating because for the first time since I had been here, someone Asian recognized me as their own when I had felt so isolated because of my previous experience. To him I was Asian enough and a pantless ping-pong adversary. It took that small phrase from him to realize what I had missed my whole life, why was I trying so hard to fit myself in one box or another? I had been trying for so long to choose between two boxes that I don't completely fit in. But there was a third choice: to be myself. If I am enough for myself as a whole, then I am Asian enough for myself too. It was then I knew I wanted to be great, not because of my blood but for myself.

I spent the next three years of college trying to solidify that truth and help other people find it as well. For 18 years, I stood there and watched the fish swim by, but then I started catching them with my bare hands. I started mentoring new students and telling them the world is an internal struggle. If you can overcome what is within you, then the world will be an easier obstacle. I started a baseball club on campus, bringing together different students to enjoy a sport they loved. I became a dorm advisor, helping students regularly resolve personal issues and try to reach them when other people couldn't. I started writing my experiences, my emotions, and the stories of others. I began studying my culture on my own, learning stories I couldn't have found from Nanay alone. I started listening to Tagalog music, watching more Filipino movies on my own and I plan to learn Tagalog someday. Today, I am an engineer who works in renewable energy hoping to continue to make an impact on the world. I spend every spare moment of my life writing stories, in the hope I can help someone who has felt like me. Stories don't have perfect endings. There are still moments of weakness. There are days where I don't feel enough, and there are days I still compromise myself. There is a strength in continuing to try. My story is full of things I couldn't understand at the time, but I hope you do. The people that surround you, they make your life full, but first you must surround yourself with love first. The blood that runs within your veins can make you great, but you are not just where you come from; you can be great all on your own. There are people that will try to tear you down and tell you that you aren't enough. It's because you don't fit into their box and that's where your strength comes from. You own the element of surprise. Don't compromise yourself. Don't just try to fit in. There is so much beauty and intricacy to who you want to become. I believe in you, and I promise you, you

are enough. Life is just a fish, so stop sitting there. Take your hands out of your pockets and catch it if you can.

Instagram: [@cm.s.t](#)

Instagram: [@christianpmichael](#)

Email: christian.p.michael@gmail.com

