

ABC

by Jennifer Li

Grocery shopping in New York City is a pain. It means walking through streets packed with slow tourists to shove onto the pungent, crowded subway. It means the circulation of your fingers is cut off by either the handles of your own bags, or, in case you forgot them, the flimsy 50 cent paper bags whose handles are already slipping loose from their crinkly bodies. It means sometimes being fed up and calling a taxi home, spending an excessive amount of money for an awkward fifteen-minute car ride. Either way, it is not exactly the most enjoyable activity.

Yet, passing by an Asian supermarket chain while walking through the streets of the Upper West Side with my friends, the grocery store inexplicably caught my eye. Among the towering skyscrapers and flashing billboards, it was something familiar among the cold and imposing stone of the city. It was something that reminded me of home and the food that my mom cooked. The shop was easy to miss, sandwiched between the glinting windows and flashing LED lights of overpriced restaurants and coffee shops. The bustling street just outside of Columbia's campus was full of anxious students and tearful parents saying goodbye to their children. I pulled my reluctant friends with me into the store. They no doubt thought that I would make them hold the shopping bags.

But, I did not go grocery shopping.

Instead, I walked the luminescent aisles aimlessly, my eyes taking in the shiny cans and gleaming fruit stacked neatly on crates. My pace slowed as I began to observe that most of the shoppers in the store were not Asian, and neither were a majority of the products.

At that moment, one of my friends tapped my shoulder.

"You know, this is actually the first time I've been to an Asian supermarket."

I initially thought she was joking, mocking the whitewashed state of the store. Yet, as I turned to look at her and saw how she marveled at the store and its scattered assortment of Asian produce, I came to realize that this *was* her idea of an "Asian" market — hints and scarce remnants of a culture hidden behind Heinz and Kraft. Of course, she saw nothing wrong as she walked past her familiar brands. A sense of loathing for someone who could so easily walk into any store, or anywhere, really, and be greeted with familiarity



rose uncomfortably within me. Did she not realize that such familiarity was overbearing? Could she not see that it erased everything I was?

She didn't.

She didn't, and that was why there were so few Asians in a supposedly Asian market, chased away by the overwhelming amount of American brands. Waves of indignation crashed over me as I realized that I barely recognized what should have been a familiar store and that it would so willingly abandon its identity. Even more, I couldn't stand that my friend believed that all of this was normal, expected.

And yet as I look back on it, I see that I was truly mad at myself. My internalized anger reached a pinnacle as I realized that looking at this supermarket felt like gazing into a mirror. I looked like this store, rebranding and editing myself to make my experience easier. I was a result of cultural erasure, both externally and internally.

Who was I, really?

It is a weird feeling when a store seems to understand your struggles more than your friends — that the inanimate shelves and wood panels were undergoing the same changes as you. Perhaps if the walls came to life, the store would carry the same self-loathing that I had. Perhaps the store hated what it had become out of necessity, just as I did.

But there it was, still standing.

The store still catered to its consumers. And as I continued to pace the aisles, I saw it still had an expansive variety of Asian produce sitting proudly on its shelves, almost as an act of defiance.

It was still an Asian supermarket, even as it yielded some of itself to its new identity, just as I am still Chinese and American.

And that was enough. It was enough to know that no matter what, I would never truly erase my identity. It was enough to know that no matter what, I would still be myself. Just as this store would never change its name no matter what it sold. It was just different parts of the same identity.

I stopped in the snack aisle next to a box of Welch's Fruit Snacks. I picked up my favorite Chinese brand of cupped lychee fruit jelly instead.