

The Inbetweeners

“Dizz will know. Ask her.”

It is an uncomfortable moment. The teacher looks at me expectantly, as if, even with her wisdom, she somehow expects me to know the entire passage of British history. I spread my hands, eyebrows raised, trying to somehow exude an air of nonchalance, yet feeling somewhat ganged up against, a kid cornered on the playground. There is an echo to my gesture of slight disappointment, as if I had somehow failed some expectation bestowed on me simply by the lilt in my voice.

I was born in London, a child of the rainy days and sharp humor so unique to its dusty streets. My mother, determined to give my brother and I the childhood she never had, raised us in a large semi-detached house; the classic ideal of the British family life, a private school education and a long garden with neat flower beds down the sides. I attended school in a neat, well-cut blazer, tunic, white, ironed shirt and tie, my patent shoes shiny and squeaky as I walked the corridors of our 150 year old school. It was a beautiful school, an idyllic classroom surrounded by the scaled grounds of an Enid Blyton book. I learned to read, to write, to make friends, to imagine and play as one can only do as a child. And yet, when I was nine, my father received a job offer to come to America, Florida to be exact, and being as he always was a character who needed change as much as air, we moved a month before I turned ten. I remember driving from the airport, my palm cupped around the wind as it swept past the window, warmer and thicker than any I had ever felt. The palm trees were so orderly along the side of the road, fanned neatly out against the sky, so foreign and so beautiful, like stars or flowers. Sometimes, even now, I get that same feeling of awe, that I am living in a postcard, for the settings around me tend to be so perfect that I can not find within them a fault.

A person can often be taken as their culture, known for only their accent and not the story behind it. At school, I am often known as the ‘English’ girl, asked pointedly about any British part in art, history, society, government, or economics, as if just by my birthplace I have instantly become the expert. Sometimes I just want to shout that I know only as much as everyone else, but usually I find I cannot, as a hidden part of me still wants to be the girl who knows her country and culture as well as anyone can expect.

It is this barrier I am choosing to discuss, one that halts a large portion of today’s population. It blocks the ‘Inbetweeners’ of the world, the people who are neither one nationality or the other, stuck between a predicament of wanting to preserve the pride and uniqueness of their origins but also striving for acceptance in their new homeland. We immigrants move from house to house, school to school; we sit in the same classes as citizens, pepper our conversation with the same slang. And yet, we are not accepted truly in either our home or adopted country, living always between two houses but not two homes. I have lived in my house for six years, and yet I still cannot call it a home. In the United States, I am still an immigrant in the eyes of the American population, as, without a green card waving triumphantly in my hand, I am still an impermanent entity.

So why? Why do I feel this way, when I have lived in the United States for six years, have attended its schools, and have come to love everything about it, from its enormity to its diversity? It is because, even as a child, I knew that I lived in unconformity. My teachers in elementary school always called on me to read, praising my accent, but they did not understand the quietness I had been taught, the behavior and manners that had been drilled into me since birth. The kids in my classes laughed loudly, talked back to the teacher, made their opinions known. Even now, I feel I am still racing to catch up with these outspoken creatures, striving to imitate the characteristics of a country I so admire.

The airports are the worst, the limbo between a thousand worlds. It is here that the greatest melting pot of all occurs, perhaps the reason I was so drawn to the places as a kid. I loved the feel of a plane rising, taking me somewhere, as, like my father, I adored change. But it was more than that even, as if, when I got on a plane, it didn't feel like I was leaving or arriving. I felt no guilt in goodbyes, and hellos seemed like they were commonplace even when they were spaced weeks apart. And I realize now that it was because I myself felt no sense of belonging, no feeling of permanence in one location over another.

This sense of belonging, or lack of, can cause problems almost anywhere. For example, on our way home from London last summer, my brother and I entered customs wondering which aisle we were meant to line up in. Were we immigrants, politely labeled 'aliens'? I felt pretty confident that I was not a small green man with tentacles for eyebrows, but a good American student, and had been for six years. So we went into the 'permanent resident' line, thinking we did live in America permanently. The man in the cubicle barely looked at our passports before throwing them back at us; mine scooted off the cubicle completely onto the floor. I bent to pick it up, feeling silly as my bag swung round and hit my forehead. I felt I could hear the line behind me chuckling, impatient as we 'immigrants' tried to push ourselves ahead, and I had never felt so small.

"We've lived here for six years, we go to school here..." My brother tried to explain, but the man cut him off.

"You'll have to go back soon enough." He said firmly, and there was no kindness in his voice, as if just be existing, just by standing at his cubicle, separated by a barrier of plastic and country, we violated some sort of taboo.

The only way I know how to break a barrier is to fight it. I still insist on taking a fierce pride in my nationality, but I also take the time to prove my place as an American. I am an Inbetweener, a traveler between two nations, and even though these countries are both in many ways alike, I still feel the pressure of being looked upon as an outsider. For all immigrants to American soil, the path to acceptance can often be difficult, especially for those who are separated even further by language and religion. However, the way forward is through equal pride, and as the population of immigrants in the United States becomes ever larger, their united force becomes one that cannot be overlooked.