

## My Own Two Eyes

When I exit my car, the desire to have a mask that covers my entire face is consuming. It would allow me to play pretend, like a child hiding under a blanket from their monsters.

Unfortunately, I'm not a child anymore. I lack the bewilderment I experienced as a child when comparing the big, bright eyes of my white friends to the dark slits my Korean parents and I had instead. I lack the confusion-but not the shame-I felt when a boy I didn't know called out to me and pulled his eyes back, earning laughs from those nearby. I lack the misunderstanding that made me kneel on Sundays at Mass, close my eyes, and pray to God for Him to please give me pretty blue eyes like the beautiful protagonists of movies, only to say amen and see nothing changed.

Of course, now I understand, and all too well. It's this understanding that creates the tension that runs across my shoulders. It's why my steps fall quick and nervous and soft. It's why I feel like sinking with the knowledge that there is no place for me to hide, not even behind my mask. It is why it is with great reluctance that I enter the grocery store.

With a focus that I only adopted since the beginning of the pandemic, I quickly head to the produce section to scan for tomatoes, and, when I find the display, approach it swiftly. The less time spent shopping, the better.

I'm not so fast, though, that I miss the eyes of a young boy staring at me. He wasn't older than seven, wearing a mask and holding onto the leg of his mother, a fair woman with lengthy blonde hair. When our eyes meet, I smile politely at the boy and, feeling my face move behind my mask, drop the smile and look away. Although this may be considered the new normal, it is still jarringly new.

When I stop beside the tomatoes, I hear an insistent "Mom, Mom," from the boy. The mother hums in response. I don't intend to stare, but my gaze lingers on him when I see his pointer finger, stubby and defiantly accusatory, aimed at me. He says, with all the boldness only a child can have, "She has the virus." Only then I realize he's not pointing *at* me: he's pointing at my *eyes*.

I don't have time to tell them about how responsibly I take the pandemic, how I haven't seen my family in months to protect them and myself, and how I most certainly do not have the virus. The mother has already grabbed the boy's hand, though, and pulled it down. "Stop it. You can't say that about people just because they're-" the woman stops to look at me. The eyes of the woman do not feel any less accusatory. If anything, they are unapologetic and unwavering in their aggression.

The unspoken word is, at best, "Asian." At worst, it's a slur. I try not to dwell on it, but I fail. Months from now, that woman won't think of or even remember the word she almost said, but I will. It's a privilege and a luxury to never experience the agony of a single, unspoken word.

The woman turns back to her son and I turn back to the tomato display. I'm about as red as one, hot underneath my mask. I stare at the tomatoes and try not to think about how difficult it is to shop when I feel unsafe all the time. I don't want to think about that news article that has continued to haunt me whenever I step outside: the one about that woman from a city a few hundred miles away that was assaulted just because she possesses Asian features, like I do. I especially don't want to think about how the virus may not even be the most immediate threat to my health.

It wouldn't be until much later that I would think about grocery shopping and realize that I forgot to get tomatoes.

I try very hard to move on and finish my shopping. I tell myself that I'm not terribly troubled. I insist upon it; I purposefully ignore my hands and the way they're shaking, so I have plausible deniability. I'm not scared: I'm just abundantly cautious and careful, and that's all.

I tell myself that, but I know the truth. What I don't know is how much more of this I can take. I don't know much more I can bear to witness with my own two eyes.