

I'll Pass

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“Everyone, this is Ann-Carol. She is a new student from another country, and she speaks French.”

A wave of high-pitched *oouus* filled the room as I stood meekly in front of my peers. I turned to my teacher with a confused expression but said nothing.

Why are they making that noise? Were they making fun of me?

The first day of first grade was, at the time, what I considered the worst first day of my life. You must understand that my transition from African to American life was forced in less than two days. At the age of seven, I was put on a plane from Tunisia, landed in Maryland, and was forced to wake up early the next morning to go to an English-speaking elementary school. You must also understand that I spoke not one word in English, save for the word “teacher,” which I repeated after my father whispered it when my principal asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and the word “go.” I do not remember how anything truly played out during my first day in the American educational system, but I remember exactly how I felt about everything.

I felt proud when I was able to communicate what I needed for my arts and crafts project; I did not know how to say “ciseaux” in English, but I was able to get my point across by repeatedly clashing my middle and index finger together.

I felt like the most independent seven-year-old in the world.

Who needs English when I can use signs?

However, my sign language failed me moments later. Right after my amazing interpretation of the word scissors, right after sitting down, prepared to make the best arts-and-crafts creation of my life, I was interrupted.

Sitting next to me was a boy with light-brown skin, light brown eyes, light brown hair, crusty lips, boogers in his nose, and a personality that screamed “my mommy said I’m the most handsome boy so you’re all ugly.”

He turned to me and yelled what I felt like was a cluster of gibberish. I froze, confused. I didn’t understand his words. I had done nothing wrong, so I didn’t see why this boy was reacting this way.

He stuck his tongue out at me, so I stuck mine out at him. I did not think much of it.

Then the yelling resumed, but this time he was yelling at the teacher, pointing at me.

What!?

I started feeling nervous and warm. I had been in enough trouble in school before this incident to know that when a child was yelling at a teacher, it meant that someone was getting in trouble. I should not have been getting in trouble.

As our teacher approached our table, I frantically moved my hands and realized that saying “WHATEVER HE SAID, HE’S LYING, HE STARTED IT!” was a bit harder to communicate with charades.

The teacher came over, pointed at the board, and spoke many words. I only knew one of the words, “go.” On my first day of first grade, I was the only child who had to move their nametag from the green to the yellow traffic light, and I did not even know why (I now assume the boy lied about me being mean to him in some way).

Like my lonely nametag on the yellow traffic light, I felt isolated from the rest of my class for most of the school year. I could not relate to any of my classmates’ jokes; I could not tell my own stories; I did not obtain the basic skill of communication that would bring me closer to the new world I had been thrown into. I had the passion and the ideas, but not the skills to express them, which I began to call my weakness.

I grew determined to overcome this weakness and swore revenge on the boy for using this weakness to put (what I thought was) the biggest stain on my squeaky-clean (two hour) American student reputation.

Never again. When I learn English, you’ll get a piece of my mind.

I always resented the concept of ESOL. I found it counterintuitive to be excused from a class full of English speakers to be placed into a small room of non-English speakers to learn how to speak English. Wouldn’t I learn English better by observing my anglophone classmates, just as they as children observed their parents speak? I had technically been in ESOL from grades one to four, but by the third grade I would hide from my ESOL teacher, hoping she would not find me to pull me out of class. It never worked. I thought I had a very strong vocabulary and saw no need to continue ESOL. This showed in how talkative I became and how outgoing and confident I remember feeling. I might have been speaking grammatically incorrect sentences, but no one seemed to care. I embraced the new opportunity that I had to communicate with my peers. I talked and talked and talked. Until...

“You talk too much,” someone said during a class discussion.

What!?

“This a group talk! I’m talking!” I defended myself verbally this time. I was not doing anything wrong; we were asked to share our thoughts with the class. I was doing what I was assigned, just overzealously, as overzealous as any eight-year-old would be about talking about themselves.

“It’s true, you do talk a lot,” another kid added. “We don’t like people who talk a lot.”

Wow.

My temperature rose, and my heart started pounding. Was it from anger? Was it from embarrassment? I do not remember. I just remember knowing that I had waited for this moment for what seemed like forever. I had waited so long to blend in with the *Americans* and talk like the *Americans*, and when I finally could, when I was finally able to be who I wanted to be, I was advised to be *less* of it.

After this incident, I started to consider what my peers thought of me. I developed a fear of being considered annoying and that, along with moving four times during elementary school, affected my ability and enthusiasm to form relationships. I became less excited to meet new people, afraid that they would not like me. I finally had the grammar and vocabulary to speak my mind but chose not to.

“Why don’t you ever say anything?”

Wow.

Fifth grade was the year that I learned an interesting fact: black people were *expected* to speak more. For the first seven years of my life, I was surrounded by people who were quieter than me. I was considered too loud. After being called talkative in the third grade, I became reserved and quiet, and became the pleasantly reserved black person in the room of fair-skinned people. When I moved from northern to southern Maryland, it was the first time that my skin color was the majority. However, I was rejected by the majority for not acting like them. I was not as outgoing or funny as the other people of color.

“You’re not like everybody else here,” said the only Caucasian teacher in my school of 80% African Americans, “I like you.”

During high school, I realized how socially and academically burdensome it was being introverted, but I was stuck in a quiet phase fostered by years of personal uncertainty. My high school was considered among the best in Maryland. We boasted having alumni such as Sergey Brin (Google co-founder), Martin Lawrence, and Mýa (singer) – all of whom are (at least now) very outgoing people. The school provided a fine education, with a strong English and STEM department. It was competitive and progressive. If you wanted to get ahead, it was no place to be quiet.

“Moral of the story: being shy will never pay off.”

During a summer service project before senior year, after going on a long tangent about her brother and a lottery ticket, or something like that, my National Honor Society sponsor ended her

story with those words. She was speaking to people in the room: a cheerleader, a soccer player, herself (she seemed like she loved hearing herself talk), and me.

“Did you hear me, Ann?”

She was truly only speaking to me.

I was not paying too much attention to her story—in fact I kind of tuned out for some part of it—but I was not expecting a story that started with a lottery ticket to end up as an excuse to target my introverted habits; I did not even understand how she even transitioned to that ending!

I'm only here to get my service hours. I did not ask to be put on the spot.

In a cold sweat, I responded meekly.

“You think I’m shy?” My voice was barely audible.

“No one ever did anything great by being shy. You need to appreciate the power of speech and put yourself out there! Speak, before you start missing opportunities to stand up for yourself!”

Her comments were exhausting. Every major event in my life had somehow contradicted a previous event; from wanting to talk but not being able to, to being able to talk and having my expressions silenced, to choosing not to speak and being scorned into speaking. However, by the end of high school I had passively gained the power of assertion—well, more so the power of being content. Unlike my elementary school self, I recognized my choices to pass or participate in social events or act a certain way based on my own feelings and not to please others. If it was not for this stronger power, I would still be changing my behavior based on the opinions of others. I remain in my comfortable, introverted zone that I have grown to accept, with a humble presence but abundant character as a result of ironic comments that I have heard about my persona over the years.

So, with the memories of my contradicting elementary school experiences in my soul, with a mind full of enriched vocabulary, with a mouth capable of saying anything that I wanted to say, and with everything that I could say,

I smiled, and I chose to say nothing.

I'll pass on this opportunity.

