

FEATURE

Not One of Them

A Short Story by Tian Kisch, Grade 7

For the longest time, I thought that “unique” was a nice word to describe something that was weird or different—in a bad way. Whenever I told someone their shoes were unique, it meant I thought they were ugly. And when a classmate informed me politely that I was sporting a unique hair style, I figured they thought I looked stupid. But as I read the dialogue quoted from Stephen A. about people treating him differently after he left his old school, I began to realize that I could really relate with his feelings. Going over his words, it dawned on me that unique could have another meaning, too. Unique is also a word that makes up a person’s identity; their ethnicity, their religion, and their beliefs. Unique doesn’t have to be bad.

When I read over the passage, I started recalling a few experiences I went through while on vacation in China. My dad and I were walking down the crowded street, holding hands in the steamy Guangzhou weather. People were staring at us with strange expressions as we passed by, their eyebrows raised quizzically at their companions. Gazing at their faces, I could almost read their minds. They were thinking that we made quite an unusual couple. A teenage Chinese girl and a middle-aged Caucasian man aren’t usually seen strolling together down the sidewalks of urban China. We certainly are...unique.

The truth is that my birthparents abandoned me when I was only a few days old and left me on a curb in a business district in China’s Los Angeles counterpart, Guangzhou. I don’t know if it was for my own good or for theirs. Either way, I ended up in an orphanage when I was a couple weeks old, weak and starving. The people at the orphanage thought I was going to die, because I wouldn’t eat. If it weren’t for Mrs. Han, my foster mother, I would

be buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in southern China. She was the one who saved my life by taking me under her wing and nursing me back to health. I know that I owe it all to her.

Ever since I was adopted, I’ve been living in the United States. I’ve never been ashamed of being adopted, but it’s not exactly a light topic discussed at dinner. Sure, it comes up every once in a while, but my family and I don’t talk about it excessively.

As a little girl, I remember reading stories about children who had been adopted by families and were ignorant of the fact until they were adults. I would laugh at these foolish tales, thinking that it would be impossible for my parents to conceal my being adopted from me. Both of them are of European descent, while I am from Asia. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out. Everywhere we go together, from restaurants to plane trips, people stare at the distinctive white couple chaperoning the Chinese girl. Eventually, I got used to it; although it still made me uncomfortable to walk into a public area and have people scrutinize my family and me.

In pre-school and kindergarten, I flaunted the fact my parents and I didn’t look alike; I was proud of it. It set me apart from the others. It made me unique. But as I got older, I got more and more hesitant to share my past with others. At school, I didn’t talk about being adopted, and most of my friends only found out when they met my parents, and I had to quickly explain to dissolve their puzzled looks when I introduced them. And whenever I met someone new and told them my “secret” straight off the bat, they would clam right up and stop talking, like they were scared of offending me or making me cry. People began to treat me with sympathy that I didn’t want, and they started to look at me differently, just like

how people looked at Stephen differently when they found out he was Jewish. Finally, I just stopped telling my classmates. I was afraid, I guess, of being singled out of my clique, of being the odd ball of the group. I would flip through the pages of teen magazines and wish to be one of those gorgeous, blonde girls with topaz eyes who were perfectly ordinary. I wanted to be one of them. I didn't want to be different, and I certainly didn't want to not fit in. But that was soon to change.

When in China last summer, my family and I visited a couple of orphanages with infants and young children in the same situation I was thirteen years ago, abandoned by their birthparents, their only hope to be adopted. Playing with the babies and chatting with the caretakers at the welfare institutes was like seeing a ghost from the past. It suddenly hit me that I was lucky to be adopted; to live in America. I was lucky to have a loving family, a nice house to live in, to have enough to eat each day. I no longer wanted to hide that I was adopted; I wanted to show it off.

Like Stephen, I "felt like I was just like all of the other kids my age." I played lots of sports, owned an iPod, hung out with cool people, and wore Abercrombie and Fitch. The only thing that set me apart was my one-of-a-kind family, and it really irritated me when people started to treat me differently when they found out about it. Similarly to Stephen, I had to wonder, "I always thought the kids there accepted me...was it something that had changed in me or was it perhaps in them?" I don't think I'll ever

know. But I do know that I'll never be "one of them", and I'll always be unique. And you know what? I think I'm proud of that.

Author's Note

Not One of Them was written in response to a prompt about the Holocaust (below); a quote from a man named Stephen Adler, who was a boy during WWII.

Only seven years old when he was forced

"I felt like I was just like all of the other kids my age. My parents sent me to a Catholic school and I always thought the kids there accepted me. One day I was told that I could no longer go to school - Jewish students could not be in a classroom with non-Jewish students. People began to treat me differently. Was it something that had changed in me or was it perhaps in them? Little did I know that this was just one more step on the road to the Holocaust."

— -Stephen A., born in Berlin, Germany 1930

to move into a private Jewish school, Stephen was accepted into the 'Kindertransport', a program that allowed Jewish children to escape into England from other countries endangered by the Nazis. Stephen and his family managed to survive the Holocaust, but only after countless losses and painful suffering. Later, they moved to the U.S. Stephen now lives in Washington State.

One of the questions in the writing prompt was, "Are there parts of Stephen's comment that relate to you?" The author, identifying closely with the quote, chose to answer this question.

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Tian Kisch is in 7th grade at Redmond Junior High, and lives near Redmond, Washington in a family of four and much loved cat. When she's not hanging out with her friends, listening to music, or kicking around a soccer ball, she's writing short stories and reading. Tian also loves singing and swimming.