Reshma Saujani

WHEN I ORDER THE grande chai latte at Starbucks, I almost always lie. It's a white lie, as innocent and airy as the foam on top of the drink, and it's been carefully constructed to make all our lives easier.

"Can I get your name, ma'am?"

"Maya," I say efficiently, pulling out my credit card.

The barista is a teenager with lavender-streaked hair and eyeliner so exquisite and precise, I wish for a fleeting moment I had chosen a more mysterious name, one that might impress her, as exactly nothing seems to do. She scrawls Maya on the side of the cup with her Sharpie and I think about Maya. The real Maya whose name I stole for my Starbucks order.

She happens to be my niece. She's a beautiful fifteen-year-old who has no idea I borrow her name regularly. But I do this because the baristas can spell and pronounce it correctly every single time.

1
America Ferrera

"Reshma, you won't find your name there," my mother tells me.

*R-E-S-H-M-A.* I whirl the squeaky cylinder kiosk around and around, searching for my name in the rows and rows of key chains. They are pink, pale blue, neon green, and black. Printed with gold lettering on each is what seems like every possible name that could be granted to a ten-year-old girl shopping for school supplies at a suburban-Chicago Kmart in 1985:

RACHAEL, RACHEL, RACHELLE, RAINBOW, RAMONA, REBECCA, REGINA, RENE, RHIANNA, RHONDA, RITA, ROBERTA, ROBIN, RORY, ROSANNE, ROSE, ROSEMARY, ROWENA, RUBY, RUTH . . .

The not-my-names dangle in front of me like shiny ornaments on a cruel Midwestern Christmas tree. Two different spellings of Rachel are offered, and to me, a young girl with a surprising sense of justice, this seems fair. There are at least two Rachels in my class at school, but I have never met a Rory or a Rowena, so it doesn't seem just that these names glitter past me on my search for Reshma. I am incredulous that somebody out there in America named their daughter Rainbow; enough somebodies, in fact, that each and every girl named Rainbow gets a key chain with her quirky, adorable name on it.

"In Bombay you would be able to find a Reshma key chain," my mother tries to console me.

*Reshma*, it turns out, is like *Rachel* in India. It is as common and standard a name as they come half a world away. But here in the United States, it is more acceptable to name your daughter Rainbow. My mother is right. There is no *Reshma* printed in gold, jangling on a hook for me. I check the boy-name section, just in case, but I do not find myself there either.

At this moment in time, there is no useless plastic object that could mean more to me. Seeing my name reflected on a cheap trinker would have
changed my world. For years to come, I would grow used to this. I would never meet a Cabbage Patch doll with my name—though I did come across one named Rowena in my time. I never read a book about a brown-skinned girl named Reshma, and I never saw another mother wearing a sari and bindi in Kmart.

For a person like me who has run for public office twice and worked on several political campaigns, it is not advisable to admit to lying. But my Starbucks lie is just the first of many harmless assimilations I have perpetrated in my life. I have cultivated several everyday methods for making my name roll off someone else’s tongue. At times, I can be jaded about hearing my name butchered over and over again, but I am pragmatic enough to know that you might not have seen my name before, and you might stumble when you try to spell it or pronounce it.

I grew up in Schaumburg, Illinois, a suburb connected to Chicago by a major interstate that brings people there to shop at one of the largest malls in America or happily disappear into a cavernous, endless IKEA. Schaumburg is close to the airport and populated with hotels, golf courses, and restaurants like P.F. Chang’s, Outback Steakhouse, and Red Lobster. It wasn’t a terrible place to grow up, but for a young brown girl, it was terribly lonely.

Ironically, when you are the only one of your kind, it is difficult to be authentic. You are unique. You don’t blend in. This should make it easier to be the real you. Because there’s no one like you. But, instead, this is isolating. You are so unique that they don’t make a key chain for you. You will never blend in. You can’t disappear into the crowd. I remember wanting to be white, wanting my key chain so I could unlock the secret to fitting in, having friends, and being happy. My life would be better, I thought, if only I
had blond hair and ate at McDonald’s like everyone else. But Hindus don’t eat beef, so I was stuck with vegetable curry, which meant I was always scrubbing my hands and face. I was convinced my classmates could smell it on me (because they taunted me and told me all the time they could smell it on me). I brought white-girl food (bologna, cheese, and mustard on white bread) in my paper-bag lunches at school and kept my head down around Easter and Christmas. A lot of quiet effort went into ensuring that no one found out I didn’t pray to Jesus. White wasn’t necessarily perfect or better in my mind. But it was normal. It had a key chain, a presence, a home in Schaumburg, Illinois.

My parents came to Illinois from Uganda in 1972 after literally throwing a dart at a map of the United States to choose where to start over. The Ugandan dictator Idi Amin expelled them—and all other people of Indian descent—from the country. My parents were both born and raised in Africa. It was all they ever knew. They had engineering careers and a rich community of friends and family. And, suddenly, they were given ninety days to leave.

Before they threw the dart that landed on Illinois, they were denied access to several other countries. The United States was the only nation that would have them. My father immediately began looking for a job as a mechanical engineer and was promptly told by a recruiter that he should Americanize his name and lose the accent. My dad, Mukund, became Mike. My mother, Mrudula, became Meena. And a few years later, when he was working in a factory and she was working at a cosmetics counter, Mike and Meena had me.

And named me Reshma.

“Why didn’t you guys give me a normal name?!” I remember asking this for the first time around the age of ten. I was reading Sweet Valley High books and contemplating how easily they could have made me an Elizabeth
or a Jessica. Because even though my parents' name changes may have helped them get jobs, it didn't stop our house from getting regularly egged and TP'd by the kids at school. As we attempted to cover the spray-painted words *dot head go home* off the side of our house, I couldn't help but wonder if maybe they could change *my* name too.

I marveled at what it would feel like to wave your hand and transform everything. One day, *Mukund* was suddenly *Mike*. From that day forward his name was on a key chain. A person could simply authenticate himself as an American and enjoy the American-size horizon of possibilities that came with it. Why shouldn't I blink my eyes and reopen them as a *Rebecca*?

True to cultural form (at least if you're Indian), my parents didn't talk about personal decisions, emotional hardships, or the numerous dilemmas of safety and identity they must have faced in their young adult lives. They were political refugees with young children, living in a town where they were almost the only Indians. This could not have been easy. More than once, we were told to go back to our own country—a country I was not connected to at all but for my name.

And yet, my parents didn't push their culture on me. Of course I ate vegetarian with them in our house and accepted their pacifist ideals. But they never taught me their language. *Reshma* was my only connection to the fine, exotic, colorful fabric of a country I didn't understand. Even my parents grew up removed from India, the children of immigrants themselves, coming of age in Uganda, living as *Indians away from India*. Sometimes I pondered that they must have given me an Indian name out of loneliness. Maybe it was just nice to utter an Indian name every single day, to count one more Indian person living among them in Schaumburg.

*Reshma*, I have since learned, means *silken; she who has silky skin*, and I can't help but wonder if Mike and Meena were aware of this definition. Have
they come to understand its irony like I have? Do they remember the moment the girl with the silky skin became the girl with the thick skin?

It was a schoolyard fight and her name was something like Melissa. I have changed it to protect her privacy, but names are important, so I use this one as a substitute. Melissa and her friends often called me names and made fun of the color of my skin. It happened all the time. I became very good at using the middle school tactic of pretending to laugh and be in on the joke. I would ignore how much it hurt and allow them to make fun of me more. Be a good girl, like your parents taught you. Hindus are pacifists. Don't fight back. Better to deny myself my anger. Easier to focus on my extreme desire to just be white. But when Melissa told me to meet her in the back of the school for a real fight that day, an impulse awakened in me to fight back.

Maybe my sudden chutzpah came from the fact that it was the last day of eighth grade. Summer had finally arrived, and high school was looming. I could start over there. This was my opportunity to stop hiding from them—and myself. To stop wishing to be white, and to start being me.

I arrived at the designated spot behind the school and was met by Melissa, a tennis racket, and a plastic bag full of shaving cream. And also almost every member of the eighth-grade class. Before I could even set down my backpack, they were coming at me. Knuckles crashing into my eye, I blacked out almost immediately.

A few days later, I walked across the stage in my eighth-grade graduation ceremony sporting a black eye and a new attitude. I wasn't going to try to be white anymore. I was brown. And for the first time, I was ready to embrace it.

When I started my freshman year at Schaumburg High School a few months later, I volunteered to start a diversity club. I knew I was going to have to be an active member of the community to defend myself—to find myself. So I created Schaumburg High's PRISM, the Prejudice Reduction
Interested Students Movement. Names matter, and I wasn't kidding around when I came up with that one. My confidence was still a little shaky, and I was still struggling to find a way to be proud of what made me different (or "diverse," as the kind, liberal, white teachers in suburban Chicago liked to call it then). Yet I somehow knew that activism was my avenue to fighting prejudice and finding a way to be brave about being me.

One of PRISM's first big events was an assembly where the students of color stood onstage in front of the whole school while the rest of the mostly white students sat in the audience, invited to ask us questions. This was purely my idea. To make a zoo animal of myself and all the other "diverse" kids. There we stood in front of the microphones, Schaumburg High's Indian, black, Latino, and Asian kids, ready to take questions about our identities, our parents' cultures, our souls. Looking back, it seems like this could have been a traumatizing event for a ninth grader, but it was my way of stepping out. I was determined to open a dialogue. I was ready to stand in front of a very white room and shine a spotlight on my very brown face. The questions poured in like bullets from a firing squad:

"Were you born with a dot on your head?"
"Are there terrorists in your home country?"
"Are you an American citizen?"
"How many Hindu gods are there?"
"Do you bathe in curry?"

Despite the vaguely racist questioning, I was proud of what I had organized. I wanted to "reduce prejudice," and the sometimes-insensitive curiosity hurled at me that day was a starting place. And it changed my thinking. It positioned me as the Indian girl who wasn't ashamed. In fact, it actually created a framework for how I discussed my culture with white people for the rest of my life ("Ask me questions," I still tell them). And for the first time, I
was publicly expressing some pride in who I was. And I managed to assemble an entire community of fellow kids without key chains.

I was beginning to learn that bravery is like a muscle, and once you flex it, you can't stop. And being authentic requires a lot of bravery. We closed out the PRISM assembly doing a step dance to Aretha Franklin on the loudspeakers, singing the lyrics "Pride, a deeper love! Pride, a deeper love!" This dance was fundamental to everything in my future. I was no longer going through the motions of trying to fit in. I was literally parading my true self right there for all the white kids to see. Pride and bravery were magical feelings, and I wanted more of them.

Years later, when I ran for political office for the first time, I was exercising my bravery again. I had enjoyed several years of a lucrative career at a Wall Street law firm but longed to make my life more about helping to build communities and improving the future of this country. I wanted to push myself. And much like barging into Schaumburg High to start a diversity club, the idea of running for public office felt good—like I was flexing that bravery muscle again. So I bravely quit my job. I bravely ran for Congress. And I bravely lost by a landslide.

But I did it authentically, as myself, as Reshma. In the early stages of campaigning, I was told to change my name to Rita, given the advice that people are more likely to vote for you if they can pronounce your name. But my bravery had brought me this far. I wasn't going to stop now. I could never turn my back on Reshma to become a Key-Chain Rita. And losing authentically allowed me to articulate something I was passionate about. I wanted to find a way to address the fact that American girls are often raised to value perfection over bravery. They want to be Sweet Valley Jessicas instead of Schaum-
burg Reshmas. So I ran my campaign on a platform of bringing computer science into every classroom and making sure girls were given equal access to learning coding. I focused on this because the process of learning to code—building something from the ground up, using trial and error, failing and starting over—allows you to see for yourself that perfection is pretty pointless. And bravery leads to wonderful things.

I should know. After the election loss, I had the gall to start a national nonprofit called Girls Who Code, and I don't even know how to code, myself.

But thanks to my childhood, growing up with two very brave immigrants as parents—who just like me were children of immigrants in Uganda—I now know it is more important than ever to be brave and proud of my identity, to own my role in changing the world, one election loss at a time.

Yes, I did run for office again a few years later. And yes, I lost again. But bravery is contagious.

On election day, I was running around in the rain shaking voters' hands up to the very last minute. I met a woman—I did not catch her name—who was rushing to the polls. As she passed by me, I smiled and said, “Who are you voting for today?”

She hesitated, flustered but kind. Embarrassed she couldn't pronounce it correctly, she fumbled out an *uhh* as she frantically pulled one of my fliers from her bag.

“This woman,” she said as she pointed at my name on the piece of paper.

Even though she needed a cheat sheet to remember who she was voting for, I couldn't help but swell with pride that I had an Indian name. I couldn't help but think of my parents. When they chose to name me Reshma, did
they dream of a world where it would be unthinkable to go by Rita instead? I had spent years assimilating as a child, and for the first time, I thought I knew why my parents named me Reshma.

Maybe they didn’t want me to blend in as much as I thought. They blended in so I wouldn’t have to. They paid the ultimate price for my authenticity. They gave up their community, their careers, their language, their own names. These were the steep taxes they paid to make a better life for me. Assimilating in the ways my parents did can invite accusations. Changing your name and hiding your accent could be seen as passive or fearful gestures. But my parents’ immigrant experience reveals the great reserves of bravery and pride they had in order to survive in a new country with no familiar community of support. I think my parents are the bravest people I know. They traded in their names for the freedom and privilege I experience every day. Because of them, I have the platform to be brave. They built the stage I stood on at the PRISM assembly. They laid the groundwork for a little girl named Reshma to grow up and become the first Indian-American woman to run for Congress.

They changed their names so I wouldn’t have to.

And while I plastered campaign signs all over my district in New York with bold block letters reading RESHMA, they were still signing “Mike” and “Meena” at the bottom of birthday cards and letters. Even though they had initially Americanized their names purely for their résumés, Mike and Meena eventually took a very strong hold—as names have a tendency to do. And now even their closest friends and family members call them by their American names. My husband, Nihal, who is of Indian descent himself, calls them Mike and Meena.

Sometimes Nihal and I watch Bollywood movies with our two-year-old son, Shaan, in the hopes he will learn some of the language. I want him to
delight in the music and color, and somehow absorb the culture I did not
grow up in. He watches with bright wide eyes, and I consider how he will
never see my parents as the struggling refugees walking the fine line of sacri-
fice and assimilation. To Shaan, they are not Mike and Meena. They are the
people with loving arms who bring him red lollipops and soccer balls, who
light up his whole face every time he sees them.

To Shaan, Mike and Meena are Granddad and Nana.

But to me, they will always be the people who made it possible for a girl
named Reshma to grow up in America and name her son Shaan—the Sans-
krít word for pride.