

The digits are at 2 a.m while I lay awake, waiting for my first snow since coming to the U.S. In my home country, Vietnam, the S-shape strip of land that intercepts the Equator snow, is a luxury. Winters there are the annoying sounds of mosquitoes, the acrid smell of humidity lingering in the air, and the chants of late vendors echoing through the night. Sometimes, it's just the heavy steps of someone digging through piles of garbage to find glass bottles, old cans, or plastic junk that people have thrown away.

I peeled my eyes open waiting for snow as I inhaled the chilly breeze tinted with the scent of wet grass and soil. The scent stirred an old memory. I recalled the image of a first grade elementary girl, eagerly waiting for her very first snow. I was six years old then, excited about school and snow when I first arrived in the Czech Republic. I even remember the crisp softness of snow beneath my feet as I hopped around.

The excitement dwindled, however, when thirty pairs of curious eyes stared at me. It seemed as though every breath I took was odd and inappropriate. That was how I was welcomed to my new school. It was even worse that I spoke no word of Czech. I told myself that everything was going to be fine. I kept telling myself that until it became my mantra.

Things did not go "fine" for the next few days. I recall the freezing morning when my mom carefully tucked into my backpack three one-hundred - Koruna bills with my brand new lunch card with the picture of me grinning widely, showing all my uneven teeth. It was a large sum of money in the 1990s, and for a six-year-old, it was an even bigger fortune. I was so excited and anxious at the same time that I hid it deep inside my back pack, and carefully

locked it with a tiny lock, before heading for PE. Coming back, all Sweaty and exhausted, I peered into the back pack to double check if it was still in there. "Oh no!" I cried "It's gone." About ten minutes later, I was sobbing, trying desperately to explain to my teacher what had happened, when one of my classmates rushed in to bring the teacher to the restroom. There were pieces of my brand new lunch card floating among all kinds of nasty things inside the toilet. Not until my classmate decided to use his own hands to get my card out of the filthy toilet did we break the silence. The money was gone. All that remained were the pieces of paper that used to be my lunch card, now so filthy that even standing near them was unbearable. I stared for a long time at my picture, still grinning happily, but now covered by ugly marks on my face.

The bell rang, rescuing me from the longest sixty-minutes of my life. I tried to wrap up as fast as possible, forcing my tiny legs to take bigger steps towards the exit before I broke down and cried. "I'm a big kid now. I'm not going to let the bad kids laugh at me," I thought. As I tried to make my way to the exit, people would stop me every five seconds to ask what had happened, to offer me a ride home. "Let me be!" I shouted in my mind. "Just let me be!" The tears started to form in the corners of my eyes and rolled down uncontrollably as more and more people stopped and asked.

When finally I emerged from the school, it had started snowing again. The wind blew hard on my face, my cheeks and nose red from crying and the freezing wind, while my small body would sway every which way the wind blew. I survived longer than I thought\_ ten steps before collapsing on the snow. I felt so small as huge peoples six feet tall passed me. I tried

to bury myself in the snow, as I felt the cold deep within me. My first winter that was anything but what I had imagined. The snow didn't even feel soft anymore; the only feeling it brought was misery. For the first time in my life, I had experienced something terrible. Eleven years have passed. But even now, I still don't understand it. Why me? Why then? Was it because I didn't have that same pretty, pale skin and beautiful locks of bright hair? Discrimination was not a part of my vocabulary. In these early years, I had already learned that "Bad things happen!" The memory became more persistent as I grew older. It is no longer a nightmare haunting me through all these years, but instead became my motive to be stronger, to try harder. It was my first dose of cruelty, and it taught me a lot about the people I would meet along the way.

Five years passed and I returned to Vietnam at age 11 with an excellent record. I spoke fluent Czech that was even better than that of some of my native classmates. The friends I made within those years said their farewell with encouragement and love. It was only proper that I held my head high, whispering to myself "It's going to be fine," as I was again welcomed by sixty pairs of eyes stuck on me on my first day of school in Vietnam. This time they didn't have pale skin and fair hair, though; yet, I don't speak the language they used. The memory that had haunted me before once again resurfaced. But I never gave up. I knew I could survive. I've done so before.

Six years later. I find myself in a new bedroom, new home, and new family in Minnesota. That old memory from the snow returning while I write a personal statement for my college application as the memories rush back to me. The fear is still there, along with the awkward

feeling in my stomach, but again, I tell myself "It's going to be fine..." as I look out the window, waiting for the rain of snow. However, I know that I will survive this winter, as well as many future winters, just as I have survived bad times in my life.