

Indistinct chattering of tourists around the bustling market filled my ears, different languages started to blend into a harmonious symphony. The upbeat rhythm of K-pop songs playing from a nearby stall morphed into an unrecognizable language. I had felt this sensation all my life; whenever I focused on one language every sound started to resemble it. As the tourists spoke, what started as Chinese shifted into English, then flowed seamlessly into Spanish, creating a surreal linguistic experience. My mind drifted away, words and phrases pulling me into my stream of consciousness. I was back in the atmosphere, the place I grew up and the atmosphere I relished. Even though I could still smell the kimchi pancakes and tteokbokki confirmed that I was in Korea, I tried to ignore the enticing smell. I looked around, searching for someone I could connect with, someone I could spend my day hearing their story, hopefully learning about their culture. This activity has become an obsession. I had met over 50 people from 38 different countries and each new connection added to the collage of printed pictures in my dorm room, giving me an arbitrary fulfillment drove me to seek out more. Even though I knew faking my identity was wrong, it was a necessity; people were more careful when I told them I was a high schooler. Back in junior high, with everyone masked, my tall height made it easier to fake. But now with my mask off, I have built my character, a SNU student majoring in architecture. The satisfaction of these encounters was sinking through my skin, becoming a part of who I was. Most of the people were Chinese, so it was easier to talk with them because I had a deep connection with Chinese friends back in Singapore. I could pretend I studied in Argentina and Spain depending on "vos" and "tú". I could relate to bhutanese culture using my experience with Tashi from Bhutan, where vibrant festivals like Paro Tshechu were being held. One day, after returning home from yet another enriching encounter, I opened the door. My mom's presence greeted me, not with anger, but with a palpable sense of disappointment.

She had discovered my secret.

Her eyes, usually compassionate and understanding, held a mixture of hurt and curiosity. She had discovered my secret—meeting foreigners by faking my identity. I braced myself for a scolding, but instead, she sighed deeply and told me to sit down. "I wish you hadn't lied to me," she said softly, her voice tinged with sadness. "But I can see how much this means to you, this passion for meeting new people." Her disappointment stung, but what she said next surprised me. "If you're truly serious about this, then I will help you. Let's learn more languages and explore more cultures together." Her unexpected support filled me with a renewed sense of purpose. Despite my deception, she saw the sincerity in my obsession and chose to guide me on this journey.

In the end, it wasn't about the facade I maintained or the identity I made. It was more about the stories I collected and the authentic connections I made. The passion had transformed into a lifelong pursuit to comprehend and cherish the rich mosaic of different cultures. As I looked at the collage of memories gracing my dorm walls, I realized this was just an inception of an enduring journey, with countless new journeys waiting for me in college.