

The Missing Piece: An Essay by Ife Agbeja

I don't like puzzles. Not because they are "boring", or because the process of finding piece after piece seems tedious and underwhelming. Not because puzzles require focus and determination. I don't like puzzles for one reason — I cannot see the complete picture until all of the individual pieces are in their place. When one, seemingly unimportant piece inevitably gets lost under the coffee table or wedged in between the couch cushions, it leaves a persistent hole that refuses to be filled with anything else. The moonlit, sleepless nights, the few spare minutes before school — all of the time I have already spent working on the puzzle suddenly seems inconsequential. One repetitive thought echoes throughout my mind: I have to find the misplaced piece.

Growing up as the daughter of immigrants — the second generation if you will, I often felt as if I existed in an enigma, in a totally different world than my parents and friends. Living in the United States, I felt more connected to American customs and foods than the culture in Nigeria, but due to my name and the way I look, people expected me to act, speak, and live a certain way. I never felt like I truly belonged, and as I grew older, I realized a piece of my life was missing.

When a jigsaw puzzle has a corner piece missing, I try to hide the hole by getting the puzzle framed. I attempted to disguise the hole in my life by *blending in*, a strategy that most parents can tell you will never work. As the only African American girl in my grade, I endeavored to look and sound like those around me, even if it meant sacrificing my health and heritage. Genuine desires and interests were put on a back burner to accommodate the "American" version of myself. Straightening my heat damaged curls, I prayed that this would be enough to make me content.

Two years ago, I was informed by my parents that our family would be spending three whole weeks in Nigeria during my summer break. To state it mildly, I was devastated. That was three weeks of missed laid back campfires, wild pool parties, and group trips to the mall — a tragedy for a seventh grader. As I grumbled about the situation to my friend, her attitude shifted. Assuming that she was as disappointed as I was, I continued rambling until I was flat-out interrupted.

"Are you seriously complaining right now? You have an incredible chance, the opportunity to fly across the world and create these unforgettable memories, and you want to complain? I have never even left the United States, and I would give anything to travel and see what I could see."

Taken aback, I sat to contemplate what she had just said. My ego was bruised, but I quickly discovered she was right. This *was* my chance to discover, to finally complete the puzzle of my identity. From the moment we stepped off the plane into the humid air, I was welcomed by the energetic buzz of the motorcycles zipping through the streets. Spicy jollof rice danced across my tastebuds, and hours were devoted to game after game of Whot, a card game that competes with Monopoly for the longest game ever. The sounds of sprightly Afrobeats flooded the marketplaces while expertly woven baskets filled with refreshing, chilled drinks sat perfectly atop the glass sellers' heads.

As my mom started to wrap my gele — a traditional headscarf—on my head before church, tears pricked my eyes and trickled slowly down my face. It was our last day in Nigeria, and though I longed for my bed in the comfort of my air-conditioned room, I realized just how blessed I was to be able to experience and feel truly connected to the culture my parents grew up in. It seemed silly then to think that I had to pick and choose who I wanted to be, as if connecting with others and understanding their ways is not how the world becomes a better place for everyone. Since then, my days have been filled with language classes, international music, and world history books as I patiently wait for the next chance I receive to explore a new culture and gain new friends. Traveling was my missing piece, and once I found it, my life was never the same again.