

## My Name

June 8, 1989 - I didn't cry when I was born. Mom says my spirit liked my name. Three letters. Y-I-A. One syllable. Yia. Although, no one says it right.

One. I still like my name.

Two. I can't complain.

Three. The smell of crispy broiled chicken wings and steamed rice.

Four. I just tricked Jer into eating one of Mom's red hot peppers.

Five. Megan calls to ask if I can go to her birthday party. Mom doesn't speak English and doesn't understand. Jer sings kwv txhiaj into the phone. I hang up.

Six. Mrs. Hanson sends home books for Mom and Dad to read with me. Except that Dad's away, and Mom can't read. And neither can I.

Seven. For show-and-tell, I bring a princess book with pretty pictures and large paragraphs. Ms. Mary says, "Don't bring books you can't read anymore."

Eight. "Why are you here? Aren't you supposed to go to school in China?" I realize for the first time that I'm the only Hmong student in my grade.

Nine. I hate, hate, hate reading big paragraphs that I don't understand.

Nine. But I do math problems for fun because  $2 + 2$  will always equal 4 no matter the language.

Ten. Mrs. Hartman reads a book about a Hmong girl and her story cloth. Wait, there are books about us?

Eleven. Dad drives us to the school choir concert. We're stopped at a red light on Hastings Way. A man in a truck next to us is yelling, his arms waving, his face red. Dad rolls down the window and asks, "What did you say?" The man yells, "Are you stupid or something? Look at how far up you are! What are you, an idiot?" Dad rolls the window up. He sits quietly. I drop out of choir the next day.

Eleven. A Hmong boy has joined our school. And he's in my grade.

Twelve. He tells me how Whitewashed I am before transferring to another school.

Thirteen. I pass out invitations to the Hmong New Year. Annie can't go because her parents don't think it's safe. Nelly's already been there. All we do is sing, dance, and eat chicken and rice. None of my friends come.

Fourteen. "Woah, her hair is like fish line!" The boys gather around and begin plucking my hair.

Fourteen. I hate my name.

Fifteen. Did your dad kill those hunters?

Sixteen. Mrs. Newport is new and thinks I'm a foreign exchange student. So I play along for the first 9 months. Alysha, Brady, and I have to write a poem together, but they're goofing off so I write it myself. Brady hands it in. Mrs. Newport walks over, loves the poem, and wants to know who wrote it. I raise my hand, and she says, "You wrote it? Oh no, I want to know the *writer*. The *author*. The person who put the words together." I look at Alysha who looks at Brady who looks at Mrs. Newport who's applauding Alysha, telling her she should really consider a career in writing.

Sixteen. Alysha and Brady tell my good friend Jesse who is in a different section of Mrs. Newport's class who raises his hand to state that just so you know, Yia writes and speaks better English than most of the white kids in this school. And no, she is not illiterate. According to Meghan who was sitting next to Jesse.

Seventeen. I receive my acceptance letter to UWEC, the only school I applied for and the only school Mom and Dad would let me go to and the only school I really fell in love with. Mary is frantic. She applied before I did. Where is her letter? Cassie tells her, "Well, Yia probably got accepted first because she's Hmong."

Seventeen. It's Yia. Not Yee-ah.

Eighteen. My circle of Hmong friends grow from zero to 10 overnight. I guess that's what happens when you go to college.

Nineteen. "You're a little different from all the other Hmong girls we know. Like when you speak? I don't know how to explain it, but you're intimidating."

Twenty. I ask a professor for a letter of recommendation. They tell me to break up with the white boy I've been seeing.

Twenty-one. My first internship. “Someone like you will never amount to anything, and the world will swallow you alive. I guarantee it. If I were you, I wouldn’t even bother applying to graduate school. You’ll never make it out there.” I cried that night. And then I sent in my application.

Twenty-two. *Peb twb tsis yog nws neeg. Nws tsis paub peb lus. Peb tsis paub nws lus. Lawm hnub, leej twg yuav tuaj nrog neb noj tshoob?* In other words, if you marry him, no one will come.

Twenty-three. I marry him anyway.

Twenty-four. I work with a little Hmong girl who watches me and whispers, “I think you is not Hmong.”

Twenty-five. (breathe)

Twenty-six. Kuv lub npe hu ua Yias. Kuv yog Hmoob thiab.