

## STEPS

By Fiona Pan

I'm Sunny, a 14-year-old Taiwanese teenager. Every day at school, I hear the same thing: "no one wants to smell your food, sit somewhere else." It's like a game of poker. You need to play your cards right. However, in my case, the game is called high school.

My life is full of stereotypes. I watch people assume the worst about everyone around them. Every day, I walk to school. 6 blocks, 31,680 feet, and 3 stairs, four if you count the stair stump. About 15,840 feet to school, there is a market I like to stop to get my breakfast: oatmeal and hot water. I try to get to school early, so I'm not stuck in the 9 am foot traffic.

The best part of my day is 20 minutes after the bell rings, 40 minutes before my older sister Quinn gets home. 30 minutes I can call my own. Most of the population calls this time 3:20, but for me, it's Sunny time. The time where I am home alone and free.

Quinn is my older sister by three years, two months, four days, and 6 hours. I'm convinced she was upset when I was born, knocking her into the family's dreaded middle child slot. Even as a middle, she is "perfect" and is focused on getting into the best college, winning the best awards, being the best daughter and the worst older sister. Some would say she is the favorite. No, I would say she is the favorite. Last but not least, there's my oldest brother, James. He is a Freshman at Boston College, he plays lacrosse there, and as is typical in an Asian family, the boy can do no wrong. Just another true stereotype.

When I went to my first day of high school, I thought it would be a breeze, but I was wrong. I walked through that front door and immediately fell out of existence. I didn't know anyone. At the same time, neither did anyone else, but I wasn't invited to group chats over the summer from new students. I was just invisible and didn't even realize it since I was busy reading. I wish I could find someone who understood my life, who was like me, or at least wanted to make an effort to see if we had anything in common.

Sunday arrived and just like that, another school week down, no friends insight and lots of time alone, at home. Everyone in my family thinks I'm the star because I am the youngest. Here is a secret, I am also the smartest, but I never brag. It's better if Quinn and James think they are smarter even though my Dad will sometimes whisper what we all know to be true, I'm a genius. We go to dim sum on the weekends with family and friends. I always get one pork bun, three xiao long bao (shau-long-bao), one egg custard bun, and potstickers. As I left the restaurant with my family this Sunday, I saw a classmate waving to me. I didn't wave back.

The next day, I saw the same girl in my math class and decided to say hello. I walked 53 steps from the door to her locker and introduced myself. Her name is Sara, to which I smiled "Sunny and Sara" that's cool friend names. I invited her over after school; we talked for hours; I didn't even miss my 30 minutes of Sunny time. It felt good not to be alone! Sara told me she is also Taiwanese and just moved from Washington, D.C. because her mom is becoming head of the Psychology Department at the University of Vermont. We raided the kitchen as most teenagers would, and I was very happy. We like the same food!

The next day I had someone to sit with at lunch. I was so excited! And just as the Sunny and Sara show was starting, a cocky boy that used to play lacrosse with my brother said, "Hey look, there's two of them now!". Sara turned bright red. I had to explain Vermont doesn't have a large Asian population apart from both of our parents working at the University's medical school, we're kind of it. "Sunny, this is terrible. We have to do something!" Sara said. I felt lousy for not warning her this was going to happen. That day, I was taken from happy and accepted with Sara to sad and outcast in just a few seconds. I am an ice cube that freezes and then melts away with every jab toward my heritage.

Sara stopped by later that night, and we made a plan to stand up for ourselves and be there for each other no matter what. I was happy that I had someone to stand on the high school battleground with me! The next day at lunch, the same boy from the day before yelled, "Look, Asian 1 and 2 decided to come back today. What are you going to do, hit me with your chopsticks?"

I stood up, Sara followed my lead, and I said, "I am Asian, Taiwanese actually and so is Sara. Our food is delicious, but you have already decided to hate it because you are not brave enough to try new things. I'm brave enough to ask you to please stop judging us and invite you to try what we are eating, I know it's scary because you might like the food, and then you might have to like us." There was so much silence. Sara and I sat down; I smiled as she gave me an unexpected high five. And then, in the brightness of standing up for myself, I realized that I didn't count steps that day! I didn't have to fill my mind with counting stairs to take the place of conversation with a friend, I had one now, and she is courageous just like me.