
*I'm Asian, But I Can't Do
Math or Science*

When I was 12 years old I became determined to be a doctor—an ophthalmologist, to be precise. I'm not sure where I got the inspiration to want to cut open people's eyes, but I think it may have been from a medical documentary I watched on PBS (public television in the U.S.). They made it look so fascinating!

But there was a fundamental problem with my master plan. Unlike so many Asians (yes, I am stereotyping), I couldn't get my head around math or science. In fact, just the notion of the two subjects was enough to trigger near panic attacks in me. However, being the daughter of a successful doctor, and having been brought up in a conservative Korean family, I believed that my destiny lay in the stable, highly regarded world of medicine. Besides, I didn't have the personality to pursue a career that would have required me to be aggressive, vocal, and social. No, no; not me. I was a

painfully shy child who was always being told by my teachers that I was “a good listener.” In other words, I NEVER spoke in class—not a peep.

My chronic shyness was undoubtedly borne out of the unusual circumstances of my upbringing in Middle America. I was born in Columbus, Ohio, where my father was getting specialist training as a psychiatrist at Ohio State University. (Yes, I know, having a shrink as a father made for an interesting childhood in itself, but that’s another book altogether.)

Now, everyone should have known from the start that I was destined to be on television. Why? Well, there weren’t too many Asian babies being born in Columbus back in 1966. In fact, I was the only one on the maternity ward. This fact alone made me an object of curiosity. On top of that, I was born with an astounding amount of hair. No, really, I looked like Don King’s new grandchild, but with fair skin. When I popped out of my mother after nearly killing her, the doctor announced: “It’s a girl . . . LOTS of hair!”

My appearance was so freakish that the maternity ward was inundated with visitors who wanted to see the new member of the Addams Family, Asian Cousin It. The nurses in the ward finally put me next to the window so that everyone could get a closer look.

It was decades later that someone pointed out to me the significance of those events. I was telling this story to the make-up artist for the talk show I was hosting at Oxygen Media, who very insightfully said: “May, don’t you see? You were captivating an audience starting the day you were born. These people were watching you through a glass pane, just like on television.”

I had never looked at it that way, but she was right. However, on the day of my celebrated birth I was a bit too—how shall I say?—*newborn* to realize that being in front of an audience was to be my fate. It took me nearly two decades to have that light-bulb moment.



I grew up as a dutiful, cookie-cutter Asian kid in one of the whitest parts of the U.S., in Dayton, Ohio. I tried to live up to everything that I, as an ethnicity, represented. For instance, I played the piano competitively from the age of five. My mother had been trained as an opera singer and pianist, so it was no surprise that she also wanted her children to have musical training.

At first, playing the piano was fun, but it soon turned into a kind of hell. The competitions became more serious and nerve-wracking. One year I made it to the finals of a national competition and had to perform in the “Hall of Mirrors.” The name was appropriate, since the theater was plastered with mirrors as well as fancy-schmancy murals and gold leaf ornamentation. To make things even more terrifying, the panel of judges sat up in the first-tier balcony so they appeared like gods staring down at the stage. *American Idol* is a cakewalk compared to what I had to go through in that competition. Fortunately, I kept my nerves in check and performed well enough to tie for first place.

But winning piano competitions wasn't enough. I had to add the cello to my musical repertoire, because my mother said I had to play an instrument that would allow me to join an orchestra. I'm not sure if that was something that came from the rulebook for Korean mothers. There was also gymnastics, ballet, figure skating, tennis, golf. . . I was exhausted by the time I was 12. It's no wonder I wanted to focus on just one, solitary thing, which seemed, at the time, so easy: becoming a doctor.

Knowing full well that I was never going to be a professional musician or athlete (I let all those other over-achieving Korean kids take over), I poured my heart into the pursuit of medicine, beating my head against the wall every step of the way. At first, I really thought that my inability to grasp the scientific and mathematical worlds was just a “phase.” Maybe I was merely a late bloomer? Surely I would eventually catch on and ace my way to the top of the class. I was Korean, for crying out loud! I was supposed to be brilliant!

Riiiiight.

Unfortunately, I never grew out of that “phase.” I was in perpetual science and math hell. My total and complete ineptitude nearly cost me my high school graduation, which would have been reason enough for my mother to beat her chest in humiliation until she keeled over. (FYI, Koreans tend to express their sorrow, agony, or misery by beating their chests and wailing. It’s an odd but effective form of release.)

My high school—located in Farmington, Connecticut—was a very prestigious, and very expensive, boarding school called Miss Porter’s School. Jackie Kennedy Onassis had been an alumnus. It was *that* kind of school. All the more reason for my mother to beat herself silly.

I should have known in my junior year that I was headed towards a disastrous scientific path. I was desperate to keep my head above water in biology class, taught by Ms. Pegau, a slightly crazy Southerner. Picture the personality of Shirley MacLaine’s character in *Steel Magnolias* and the physicality and energy of the woman in *The Sound of Music* who couldn’t stop bowing after she won third prize in the talent contest, and you’ve got Ms. Pegau. She scared the hell out of me, and I just wanted her to like me. One day, I had my chance.

We were on the topic of infections and learning how they can spread if one isn’t careful. Ms. Pegau asked the class in her Southern twang, “Has anyone had a bladder infection?” I couldn’t believe my luck! This was a question I could actually answer correctly! I quickly raised my hand. She called on me and asked me to describe what a bladder infection felt like.

OK, so it wasn’t one of my proudest moments; but hey, I was willing to do just about anything to get on Ms. Pegau’s good side. I proceeded to describe my experience, using words and phrases such as “burning,” “painful,” “always having to go.” Ms. Pegau then described what I may have done to cause the infection.

I still cringe whenever I think about it. She accused me of wiping the wrong way after having a bowel movement, thereby contaminating my urinary tract. It was completely

disgusting, and it was all said in front of my biology classmates. Embarrassing? *Oh, yeah.*

But that didn't stop me from continuing my brown-nosing (speaking of wiping!). After class I went up to Ms. Pegau and continued our discussion on the possible causes of my bladder infection. This gave me the chance to walk with her out of the science building and up the hill to the dining hall. I would later learn that my friends were watching and cheering me on, as they knew very well I needed all the help I could get in biology class.

Did my ploy work? Not one bit. Ms. Pegau still didn't really like me, no matter in which direction I wiped. I had to try and gain her approval the old-fashioned way: by studying my ass off and making the grade—or at least passing, which I did.

But then came chemistry in my senior year. The experience made biology with Ms. Pegau look like a visit to a Jimmy Choo boutique where all the shoes were free.

The teacher, Mrs. Sprollini, was tough and unforgiving, and she knew I was a crappy science student. In fact, towards the end of the year, she warned me that I might not graduate because of my poor performance. I just had to envision my parents getting the news of their daughter's failure at Miss Porter's and that was enough for me to put my ass into high gear. So determined was I to pass, I was named "Most likely to be in chemistry extra-help" in my yearbook. I did pass, but just by the skin of my chattering teeth.

Now, you might think that my traumatic experiences at school would have convinced me that a career in medicine maybe wasn't for me, but *nooooo*. This stubborn Korean girl entered Mills College, a small, liberal arts college in Oakland, California, determined to be a pre-med student. To this day I wonder if I had lost my mind, but I suppose it was the journey I had to take.

To describe my experiences as a pre-med student as "horrific" would be putting it mildly. Chemistry was bad enough,

but then there was physics. Physics! What the . . .? Oh, and don't forget I had to forge through math classes as well. Let's put it this way: I could liken my first year-and-a-half of college to wrapping my entire body in duct tape and then having strips of it ripped off on the hour, every hour. Yes, it was *that* excruciating.

So, here I was: a sophomore pre-med student without a clue in the world. But instead of channeling Joel Goodson, the clean-cut boy gone bad in *Risky Business* who gleefully said, "Sometimes in life you just gotta say, 'What the fuck?'," I was determined to find a clear direction. But how?

In times of need, I do what many people do; I pray. It was all I could think of to do.

"God, listen . . . I know I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but let's be serious . . . this is just NOT working out. I'm not meant to go into medicine, so what should I do? What am I meant to do?"

OK, so this is the part that you might not believe, *but it did happen exactly this way*. I actually heard a voice say, as clear as day: "You love writing, speaking, and visual creativity, so television journalism is your calling."

And that's it. From that moment, I had intense clarity about my future. It's as if I had never wanted to do anything else. I could really see myself racing after stories, digging for facts, and putting it all together in a compelling way. The thought of being a broadcast journalist triggered a burst of excitement in my chest and butterflies in my stomach. Like falling in love, I knew that journalism was "the one." I was too green and young to know it at the time, but what I felt was true passion, the first of the 4 Ps. Passion would be something I would continue to discover and cultivate over the years.

So, with the first "P" in my heart, I became determined to figure out just how I should go about becoming a broadcast journalist.