

# Identity

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My given name is Haruki Fujihara. For the convenience of others, I go by Alex.

To be completely honest, I don't even remember when I started going by Alex or why I chose that name specifically. Don't get me wrong, I don't dislike my given name. My mother carefully picked out the kanji characters, as do many Japanese parents, comprising Haruki so that it would best embody me, as she once put it. Haru translates to spring, since I was born on the first of spring according to the Japanese calendar. Ki can be spelled a variety of ways, but my mother chose the character meaning joy, because according to her, the day I was born was the most joyous one of her life. That's why, she always disliked when others called me Alex, probably even felt a little bit disrespected.

We had a falling out over my name when I graduated high school, and my small high school in suburban Valparaiso, Indiana wrote Alex Fujihara on my diploma. Someone in the office messed up the documentation. My mother was furious I didn't push harder (really at all) for it to be changed. We mostly stopped talking, with the exception of birthdays or holidays, after I moved out to work as a tattoo artist in Los Angeles at nineteen. That was six years ago. She's a stubborn woman, and I inherited that trait, so neither of us wanted to yield and apologize to the other.

However, I think my resolve is weaker than hers, and I felt compelled to call my mother after the appointment with my most recent client. As the line rings in my ear, I find my chest growing tight, as if I have a real bad heartburn. It dings twice. Then thrice.

"*Moshi Moshi?*" My mother's voice sounds tired, like she just woke up. I forgot about the time difference. It would be close to nine in the evening in Indiana. As I swallow back the nerves lodged in my throat, I force my hands to stop their trembling.

"Nee, Okaasan, I didn't call at a bad time, did I?"

"No. No." There is some shuffling in the background, followed by metal clambering on the counter. "I was in the middle of preparing dinner. Is something wrong? You rarely call."

"Not really..." I say, losing my train of thought. "I just-uh..." My gaze lands on one of the many figurines I had decorating my tattoo station. It's of a small child wearing black and red samurai armor, which makes it stand out amongst the anime figures who wear bold colors while holding dramatic poses.

“Haruki?” My mother calls. “Are you okay?”

“My client saw your doll, Okaasan.”

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Today was the day before a large convention was set to start at the Los Angeles Convention Center, so the Little Tokyo district had drawn in a greater influx of patrons than usual. It was already a rather condensed area with several small shops that honestly all sold the same overpriced anime figurines and botched looking keychains that looked nothing like the character. And now that the infamous “June Gloom” had passed, the California heat was a merciless sauna that amplified any B.O. Given this, I didn’t have many appointments lined up, because I wanted to make sure I could leave before drunken idiots began fighting to get inside the fifteen different sushi restaurants near my shop.

She was my first client of the day, entering my shop at eleven-thirty.

“Welcome-” I started, stopping short upon seeing the beauty standing by the doorway, timidly twiddling her fingers. She had a heart-shaped face and iridescent hair that almost took on a purple hue depending on the direction of the artificial lighting of the tattoo shop. She strangely donned a baseball cap underneath a black hoodie, and her gaze scoured the shop quickly, almost as if she were searching for something. Or someone.

“I have an appointment...” she said, rocking awkwardly on the balls of her feet. I noticed her shoes looked quite expensive for a pair of sneakers. Crisp and white with a black midsole. “It’s with Alex?”

Her name was Yuka Chobe, according to the foreign driver’s license she gave me. Her name contained the characters for summer and evening, and she was born in the same year as me, but in July. The picture looked a few years old. Yuka had more of a baby face, and her hair was cut into a bob.

“Oh, my name spelled in English is Y-U-K-”

“It’s okay,” I cut her off, passing her back her license and paperwork to sign. “I speak Japanese.”

“Really?” She switched to her native language as her eyes lit up. “You’re Japanese?”

“Technically, yes. I was born in Saitama,” I answered in Japanese. “I’ve lived here though, since I was nine.”

“Ehhh? How old are you? Your Japanese is still so good!”

“We’re both twenty-five. My birthday is in March.”

“Ehh! You’re older? I’ve been speaking so informally this whole time!” Yuka exclaimed. She pulled the bill of her hat down, trying to cover her face that was blossoming a bright red. I found it amusing. I wasn’t even that much of a senior to her, so I didn’t see the need for formalities and honorifics.

I printed off the design I drew up based on the image that had been emailed to me. It was a small piece, so I didn’t anticipate it taking too long to complete. Yuka sent me a wind chime and asked that I add a butterfly. As I continued to set up my station, sanitizing the table and getting my gloves on, my client continued to rapidly fire more questions. Sometimes, it was difficult to understand her excited kansai dialect.

“What’s your name in Japanese?” Yuka sat on the tattoo chair.

“It’s Haruki Fujihara.”

“What characters?”

“Spring and joy,” I said. “I was born on the first day of spring, and according to my mom, that was the most joyous day of her life.” I then let out an airy laugh.

“She probably regrets that now, because I drove her crazy as a child.”

“Where did the name Alex come from?” Yuka asked, an innocent question that I avoided answering by shrugging and focusing my attention on the bottles of ink I needed for the piece. “Do you not like the name Haruki?”

“No. I like my name. Alex is just easier.”

“How so?” Yuka persisted.

“Well, when you live in a country where employers are quick to judge a resume based on the name you have, it’s quite convenient to put an American sounding name.” I tried to sound lighthearted so it would be perceived as a joke. Though it hadn’t been a complete lie, Yuka didn’t seem too convinced.

“But you’re a tattoo artist. You work for yourself.”

“That is true.”

“Then why don’t you use your Japanese name?”

“Does it really matter whether I do or not?”

“I suppose not, but...” Yuka pouted, her eyebrows furrowing in a look of disapproval.

“I haven’t gone by Haruki since I was a kid,” I huffed, growing annoyed from

how her pestering started to resemble my mother's. "That's all there is to it."

I started going by Alex in the third grade. That timeline was about right. When I started school, I was the new foreign kid from Japan who spoke at most thirty words in English. My classmates kept forgetting my name or mispronouncing it, calling me "hair-ru-ki" instead of "ha-ru-ki", which was extremely frustrating. Repeating myself over and over grew annoying, so the next time someone asked, I blurted out the first American name I could think of. It unfortunately stuck.

On the first day of school I always mentally prepared myself for the blank stare of confusion from the teacher looking at the roster, trying to figure out how not to screw up my name. They would go through the Andersons, Davidsons, and Johnsons with ease, pause, then tentatively sound out "Fu-Fu-Fu" of Fujihara without the same previous confidence. I'd awkwardly chime in, "I go by Alex," and the teacher would nod and never use my given name again.

The bad part is, my name was a relatively easy one to pronounce in Japanese. It looked how it sounded, but little attempt was ever made to say it correctly. Except by the one Korean girl in my sixth science grade class who was kind of in the same boat as me. Her name was Minyeong, but people called her Minnie.

"Why do you keep calling my son by a name that is not his?" My mother would angrily say during PTA meetings. "Do not call him anything but what is on his birth certificate." Combined with her thick accent and broken English, the teachers often could hardly understand her, let alone grasp why she was upset.

"Mrs. Fujihara," my teacher tried to calm her down. "Alex here-"

"Haruki! His name is Haruki!"

"Okaasan, please," I muttered, sinking into my seat, wishing the cushion would swallow me whole and save me from the embarrassment that was my mother. "I asked them to-"

"No!" My mother interrupted, switching to Japanese out of habit when she was angry. "That is not the name I gave you. Do you care nothing about what your name means?"

I bit my tongue, and we stopped arguing after that. Over the years she sent my dad to parent teacher meetings instead. He understood the situation a little more from my perspective. At work, they called him strictly professor (his name is Ryusuke). My mother would still make it known she disliked the name Alex, taking extra effort to address me as Haruki when my friends came over or if she did decide to come to a school function.

To be honest, at that age, I didn't quite understand why my mother vehemently opposed me using what was the equivalent in my book to a nickname. I knew my legal name was Haruki. I knew it meant "Spring Joy." That wouldn't change

despite my desire to go by a different name so people would stop butchering Haruki. Alex didn't mean anything to me other than serving as a means of convenience for others, and honestly, myself.

"Have you never used a nickname or anything of the sort?" I asked Yuka. "It's basically the same."

Yuka frowned. "A nickname should be something you want. Not something people call you, because they don't want to learn your actual name."

"Whatever you say."

After that, Yuka dropped the topic, a prominent scowl still on her face. I resumed setting up.

The tattoo stencil stuck to Yuka's fair skin well. It fit nicely on the back of her tricep, and became completely hidden underneath the sleeve of her T-shirt once it was pulled down. I positioned myself behind Yuka, with the tattoo gun in hand. She straightened her posture as I dipped the end of the needle into the first color, black.

"If you begin feeling lightheaded, let me know," I said, turning on the machine. The gun whirled to life, resonating throughout the shop. "If you get uncomfortable then we can reposition to lay down."

Yuka wordlessly nodded. The instant the needle poked at her virgin skin, she jumped. I pulled away before I could make a mistake.

"Sorry!" She panicked. "You can continue. It just caught me off guard."

After the initial jump, Yuka sat relatively still for a first timer. Every now and then, she twitched. It was an involuntary reaction, because the nerves in the arm don't really like being aggravated. However, I was mostly concerned with how tense she was.

"Ne, Yuka, what brings you to California?" I asked.

Yuka grit her teeth, exhaling sharply through her nose as I finished the outline of the butterfly. "I'm...here for a concert."

"Oh really?" I cleaned the needle to dip into the purple next. I gently wiped her skin with solution to get rid of the excess black ink. Her arm was slowly turning an angry red. "Who are you here to see?"

"I'm actually the one performing," Yuka let out a shaky breath. "My group is called HARMONY. We're performing at LA Expo tomorrow night."

"Are you sure getting a tattoo the day before was the best idea then?" I joked.

“Your arm will be sore.”

“Today was the only day I could get in with you.” Yuka hissed as I wiped her arm again, and I muttered a soft apology. “We leave the day after tomorrow for San Francisco and then we head east.”

The name HARMONY sounded familiar. I had classmates who were fans of those various J-Pop and K-Pop groups, but I never really paid all that much to celebrities. If there was a song I liked, I added it to my playlist without looking too deep into the famous’ personal lives.

“If I may ask, is there a meaning behind this tattoo? There doesn’t have to be one, but I was just curious.”

Yuka’s body slumped a bit, the previous tension disappearing in an instant. I quickly tried to change the subject to the concert, but instead, she answered.

“My older brother passed away suddenly in a car accident,” Yuka explained. I sat back, turning the machine off. “He was my best friend, and I miss him every day. We always played with the windchimes as kids. The day after he passed, I was sitting in the yard crying when a butterfly landed on the nearby chime. I figured that it was him coming back to tell me that everything would be okay.”

One would assume that opening up about this deep of a wound to a stranger would result in waterworks. I had tissues on standby. Yuka instead had a fond smile on her face. While her eyes looked glossy, tears had yet to fall. She took a sharp breath before letting out a shaky exhale, straightened her posture and looked over to me, who quite honestly, sat dumbfounded by her strange behavior.

“On your shop’s Instagram,” Yuka continued, “there was a picture of your station with a Gogatsu Ningyo as the focus. The base of the doll had the characters of Haruki etched into the wood. I wanted to be tattooed by the one who was supposed to be the joy of spring. I figured their work would bring me happiness and help me honor my brother.”

I went quiet. My throat felt tight after the heartfelt confession. I knew what doll she was referencing. My mother had it made for me when I was a kid for Children’s Day, a holiday in Japan to celebrate youth and pray for their health and success. A Gogatsu Ningyo was the male counterpart to a traditional Hina doll, which was often given to little girls for the same event. This particular doll of mine was a miniature boy wearing red and black samurai armor to symbolize strength and power. My mother had my name etched into it. I casually started to display it in the shop for aesthetic purposes. Before then, I had it stashed away in my closet, because after a show-and-tell went wrong in the fifth grade, I really started to hate my name.

My family was one of three Asian families in the suburban town. My father got a job at a university in Chicago, and would make the hour commute twice a

week to teach his class. I disliked living in the rural city of Valparaiso, because I quickly learned that many of my peers were close-minded, a trait they inherited from their equally close-minded parents.

There was a kid in my class I particularly despised named Tyler. Tyler came from an affluent White, upper-class family who owned lake houses and took lavish vacations every month. When he first targeted me, his family had just come back from a trip to Kyoto during spring break, and he went around bragging about how much he knew about Japan, proclaiming himself some sort of expert on the culture now. I think he just wanted to show off his knowledge and that he thought he knew more than the actual Japanese student.

I often kept to myself, drawing comics alone instead of playing with the other kids at recess. When our teacher requested that each student bring in an item to showcase from their vacation, I brought in my Gogatsu Ningyo to explain about Children's Day.

"So Children's Day is the last day of Golden Week and is to celebrate children and their happiness," I explained to the best of my ability in front of the class. "My parents pray for my future and wish that I grow up big and strong."

"Thank you for sharing, Alex," my teacher said. She then turned to the class. "Did anyone have any questions?"

"Alex, what's your Japanese name?" A girl had asked.

"It's Haruki. That's what these characters here say. Together it means spring joy."

I received many awes and more questions after, including my peers asking me to write the kanji characters on the white board, which I obliged without protest.

"You know, that's such a girly meaning," Tyler scoffed. "There's no way you'll grow big and strong with a name like that. I guess that's why you go by Alex."

I wish I had said something to retaliate, but at the time, I didn't have the confidence to do so. Instead I erased my name off the board and quickly took my seat in the back of the classroom.

Fifteen years later, I received the reaction I had long desired from Yuka.

"Thank you, Yuka," I said. She tilted her head sideways in confusion. I picked back up my tattoo gun. I dipped it into the next color, pink, so that I can finish the butterfly. "Thank you for allowing me the honor to commemorate your brother with my artwork."

I finished the piece in silence, hyper focusing to make sure each shaded area, each line, was perfect. Only when she looked at the finished product in the

mirror, an hour and a half later, did Yuka finally cry.

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“I had never seen someone so happy after getting a tattoo done,” I laugh to myself as I recount the earlier interaction to my mother over the phone. “She thanked me over and over and over. It started to become awkward, because I really didn’t know what to say from praise.”

The more I think about it, the interaction is almost funny to me. Yuka came to me because of a Gogatsu Ningyo I got when I was ten. All the doll does is sit on my desk and look pretty, yet it ended up being the reason why a client desperately wanted me to tattoo her.

“Nee, Okaasan, I guess I have to thank you for getting me that doll all those years ago-”

On the other side of the line, my mother is sniffing.

“Eh! Okaasan, are you-”

“I’m so happy,” my mother says. As she’s crying, I sit silently holding the phone to my ear, listening to her wails. “You bring me so much joy, Haruki, and I’m happy someone saw my child in the way I always wanted.”

I’ve never heard my mother cry before. She is one to always save face and hide any negative emotions. Even during the times we’ve had disputes regarding my name, she never raised her voice nor lashed out, perhaps bottling up her feelings for years. After hearing her cry, I realize just how much I have been hurting her.

“I’m really sorry, Okaasan.”

“For what?” My mother asks, still sniffing.

“For disrespecting you in the way I did. I didn’t know that you saw my name in that regard.”

“Haruki, it’s not me that you think you’re disrespecting. It’s yourself. A child’s name is their first sense of identity and they will carry it with them all their life, which is why I cared so much about what it meant. You actively denied yourself that for years. You having a nickname was never the problem. It was the fact that you changed for the convenience of others.”

As painful as the realization is, she’s right.

Growing up I made excuses for others who couldn’t take the extra two seconds to learn the proper pronunciation of my name, and let bullies dwindle my



self-esteem with their petty taunting. I then let people, like Tyler, rob me of the sense of joy I felt when someone finally did take interest in my name. As a result, I shrugged off a crucial part of me.

I never really understood the significance of my name. Actually, it is more like I never comprehended how it was significant to me. The meaning of Haruki was always just the definition of the characters, and it never registered to me how my name interconnected with my identity. However, my name does not simply mean “spring joy.” It represents me and the joy that I bring, the joy I bring to my mother, and the joy I’ve brought to Yuka.

My given name is Haruki Fujihara. For the sake of myself, I should have always embraced that.