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## Don't Call Me Tan

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## **Don't Call Me Tan**

**Maya Schaefer**

Growing up, I always knew that my family was composed of people who looked different from each other, an intricate blend of cultures and experiences. It wasn't something that needed to be taught or explained, it was always just there. My grandfather, with his dark, cinnamon skin and sharp, blue-rimmed eyes, hailed from Virginia, and later, New York City. My grandmother, a petite woman with a soft smile and an Americanized English accent trickling from her lips, immigrated to the States at eighteen from a nursing school in England. Despite the differences between the two, it never occurred to me that I wasn't just one thing. To everyone, and even to myself, I was just a small girl with bright green eyes, light brown hair, and tan skin.

For seventeen years of my life, my skin was described by everyone who knew me as "tan," everyone from my biracial mother, to my white father and two brothers. Every summer, my twin brother (who was born with significantly lighter skin) and I would hold our arms side-by-side to see who was "tanner". My skin had become rather dark that summer and I noticed its likeness to my grandfather's warm cocoa skin. Sitting in my grandparent's living room, I exclaimed excitedly to my grandfather, "Momo, look! I'm almost as tan as you!" He matter-of-factly responded, "You're not tan, honey, you're brown." I smiled, but inside my head, I felt a war going on between one side of my mind, "You're not black enough to be brown." and the other, "You're too white to be brown." Internal comments that I had always feared would resurface from the mouths of my friends, family, and peers if I chose one word over the other. Many conversations between my mother and I were born from this one comment. These

conversations often started with my discomfort with correcting people, especially people of color. I had no issue telling my white peers that I wasn't tan from the sun, but rather, that my grandfather was black and it was mainly thanks to genetics. While I usually interjected in conversations with people of color that I was part-black, I never described myself as brown in front of them. I often felt that the disparity between our experiences as people of color was too great, and my struggles, to put it simply, were too white to be valid. These back and forth thoughts fueled my academic decisions. At my predominantly white and Asian high school, I regularly felt like the spokesperson for black people, a position I felt proud of, but also became overwhelmed with. Friends constantly expecting verbal corrections and social justice updates to ensure that they were not in the dark about black issues and political correctness. These occurrences led me to design my projects in school around black subjects and join political awareness clubs, while still questioning who I was, and essentially, who I was allowed to be as a young multiracial woman. My uncertainty and questions haven't ceased, but the conversations that derived from my grandfather's comment pushed me to explore who I see myself as and how I present myself to others.