[Ultimate guide for people who are not close enough to me to ask about my name.]

My name is Alma. I'm not from Spain. Not from Portugal. Also not from Poland or Finland. I'm from Korea and I gave 'Alma' as a new name to myself. People who have a bit of knowledge about Asia, they wonder about my name. What I have written down here, in this thesis document is extremely personal. While this text for me has been a way to learn, study and understand more about myself, I also hope that it facilitates the reader to understand others more.
I hope my text enlightens someone about something.

Next to the chapters i've broken my name down into, i've also explained why I've chosen them as chapters. They go as follows;

(1)My 'Birth Name': Usually, half of the people who wonder about my name ask immediately about what my real name is, while the rest ask about it when we come to know each other a bit better.

(2)My 'New Name': After this interrogation, they ask me for the reason behind the name I chose and gave to myself.

(3) Identity Crisis? A lot of people are curious (if not convinced) that I suffer from an identity crisis because of me choosing my own name. Usually curiosity towards my name ends at this point.

(4) Rachel: So far one person has told me: "'At least your name isn't a super western name like Rachael. It would be weird if you choose Rachael as your name."

(5) Surname: A former classmate, who is not at all close to me, sent me a message for the first time and asked: "Hey, :Important question. Is 'Surreal' your real surname? If it is then that's pretty surreal."

*Surreal is my last name on Facebook

1.   What is your Korean name?

Actually I have had two Korean names. My first name was originally 'Min-gyeong'. My parents are called Su-gyeong (my mom) and Seok-min (my dad), and they picked from parts of their names to create my name. Probably they were young lovers at that time and were driven by romantic reasons. But in the beginning of my teenage years, my mom suddenly changed my name to 'Sun-young'. She told me that my previous name was not a good match with my life and if I keep using that name I would die young. I don't remember that moment clearly, but there was no discussion about it with me. My mom said: "I tried to make your new name so that you can be a strong and independent woman who has her own life". I guess she wished for me not to live a life like her. A 'traditional' woman's life.

Maybe the first 10 years of marriage with my dad made her change her own daughter's name. In 10 years of marriage, she had 2 children, raised them, maintained the family and was working at the same time. And she even started to study in university. She had to work in the day, so she took an evening class and planned the future for her family. By working and studying at the same time, my mom might not appear to be a traditional woman. But she had to be. She always had to stand in the shadow of my father. She had to always be humble in front of my father, my father's family and other people even though she made big achievements in her life. She wasn't allowed to have strong voice in the family. But she was not like that in the beginning. I think she tried to fight it. She argued a lot with my dad when I was young and cried a lot. Every time when it happened I was in fear. I was terrified. What if my mom leaves us? But at some point, she seemed to have given up. I was young but I could feel it. She looked like a robot without heart and feeling. My mom frequently said: "you and your brother are the reason for me to stay in this marriage." Yeah, maybe the first 10 years of marriage with my dad made her change her own daughter's name. Wishing her own daughter could be a strong and independent woman who has her own life.

2.   What is the reason I chose Alma as my new name?

It happened pretty much spontaneously. I chose this name for myself in 2014. I was learning Spanish at that time, and my teacher suggested that we choose Spanish names to use only during our class. Not many people think to change their own name by themselves because your name is given by parents/ caregivers with your birth. Even though my parents changed my name once, I still didn't think that I could change my name by myself. The journey of 'finding my name' was pretty exciting and thrilling. It meant I could deviate from social norms and the control of my parents. I googled 'Spanish girl's names' and went through all the names from A to Z and through them all, 'Alma' caught and stayed in my eyes as a perfect fit. It was easy to pronounce, simple but not common and I especially loved the meaning of the name -'soul' or 'lifts the spirit'. At this time, I had planned to use this name only for the class. I didn't think I would be called 'Alma' outside of this class.

3.   Do you have an identity crisis?

Here's the short answer:
No.

And here's the long answer:

Well, a name does carry in it some inherent identity and character. But for me, even though my name was already changed once by my parents, they once again, chose a very common girls name. And because Sun-Young is a popular girls name in South Korea, my friends had to choose a nickname for me to point me out from the rest. Some old relatives still called me as 'Min-Gyeong'. Like this, growing up, I've been called by different names.

Maybe because I've been given too many names within a short time span, I haven't had enough time with them to feel any sort of attachment. Also, because the names are super common Korean names, I believed that they had no identity to them.

Min Gyeong is a very common Korean name, but perhaps the reason for my disattachment for it is because I don't have many memories from when I was Min-Gyeong. There are a few strong memories but none of them are nice.
compared to Min Gyeong, Sun-young is an even more common name in Korea. And of course Kim is also a super common last name. To me, it feels like it doesn't have any character. I feel like I'm a transparent person. I am just one of the many 'Sun-young's' or 'Min-Gyeong's'. I feel that to be called by this name transforms me into a member of a herd, rather than an individual. With those names I become a representative sample of Korean women, a frame from which I've been trying to get out of really badly.

Speaking of narrow frames,during my teenage years when I was living with my parents, I always thought that I was a small frog living in a well. I could see some of the outside world, but I could never reach there. I felt trapped. I was so desperate to see the big world. My first memory of articulating this desperation was when I was eleven years old and I had asked my parents to send me to Hawaii. To me, America was a country of freedom and equality, I thought I could achieve the "American Dream". I believed that me, a person who didn't have anything could become successful in America. I went to the library frequently and found some information about studying abroad. Nevertheless, my parents ignored my idea. This didn't come as a surprise to me. It was a too ambitious plan for a working class family. But I didn't give up. I read books, explored the world on the Internet and kept dreaming.

But why did I dream of the other side of the world? Why was I never happy with the world I lived in? I think I was tired of the roles that people gave to me. People called me by a name that made me feel caged, I had to obey my parents, I could not question my parents, I had to be a parent for my little brother, I had to do the household chores because I'm a woman, I had to make a fruit dish for dessert after each meal because I'm a woman, like this, I had to do roles that my parents and society gave me and live as one of the many 'Sun-youngs'.

My hometown is a very conservative city in Korea and my parents are reflective of this conservative attitude. I tried to fight with it a bit. But I was young and not economically self-sufficient, so I figured that the only way I could run away from my hometown, was to study hard. I couldn't go to Hawaii, but I could go to Seoul, the capital city, a city far away from my hometown and parents. I also had hope that I might be able to live my own life and forget about all the roles I was given and had to perform if I got to Seoul. But it was not an easy journey. Of course, just getting away from my hometown physically was not my final goal. I had many dreams and plans to see the other side of the world by myself. I felt that I had to try harder than all the others. I was not a genius that could skip classes and still pass, I had no one who could support me mentally and financially. So, I had to try harder. 2017 was a really harsh year for me, I was 18 and failed to get into university. My mom said: "you tried enough.

So study child care and continue at the kindergarten where I work". I was really shocked. I fought a lot with my parents and made a deal with them. I would study one semester of childcare studies and from summer I can focus on SAT and art tests for university of my own choice. My mum put me in a small university near my hometown. We still fought a lot. Every night I cried in the shower. I was drained and became weak. One night, we were fighting again, and my mom shouted to me: "You think you are smart, you think you are the best, heh? Live life. You will see that your life isn't working out the way you thought it would." Since this fight, whenever I've struggled in my life, I can hear my mom's voice in my ear. Every single time…

The year passed on like this but then a wonderful thing happened, I got accepted into the university in Seoul where I really wanted to go: the best school for design. I was proud of myself and felt thrilled because I thought I could finally have freedom. After that, it got more and more difficult to pretend to be one of the many 'Sun-youngs' when I was talking to my parents. I didn't go back to my hometown that much and when I did, I never stayed long. I always felt like my hometown resembled a swamp and I was afraid to get stuck there, again. But because I was still the daughter of my parents and because I couldn't survive by myself yet, I was in contact with my parents from time to time.

Untethered from my hometown, and unrestrained by my parents, by moving to Seoul, I believed I had freedom. Freedom to dream about what I wanted to be, freedom that I could do something I liked.
My blissful freedom was suddenly disrupted when I realized that this new city life came with its own set of problematic standards and expectations. Every time I was confronted with the idea of a "standard" beautiful woman, a "standard" beautiful body, a standard beautiful life, which I wasn't or didn't have, my mom's voice played in my head, and I heard her say "Life won't work out the way you want it to"

In the beginning, I didn't question these standards. I wanted to be pretty, I wanted to be skinny like a model. I always carried in me, complexes about myself: My cheekbones are too high and too big, my nose is too low, my face shape is not pretty, I'm too fat.
Growing up, people often commented that if I lost weight I would probably be much prettier, I shouldn't wear heels because men don't like when women are taller than them, If I got a nose job I would look more western, If I wore 'feminine' clothes, I would have a boyfriend, that I needed to be more soft to guys because my identity was too strong and guys don't like girls with strong opinions.
At some point, I realized these stupid rules were choking my neck and killing me from the inside. I believed I was not pretty enough to be loved or to get a job or to live in this world. But still, I tried to fit in that world. I didn't have the guts to fight alone and I felt like I was not strong enough to handle the repercussions that come with fighting against an unfair and biased system.

I was tired. I already knew how difficult it was to fight for something I wanted to achieve. To be honest, I wanted to take the easy way out and I told myself that I would save money, leave this country and then I could truly be free.

July 2016, I left my country as Alma. To avoid what I didn't have the strength to face, to have some hope, to continue my life.
With a name that gave me freedom for the first time from everything.
And since I've arrived in the Netherlands, people have always called me by Alma. The name that I gave to myself. The name that will always be with me when I struggle with what I'm looking for in my life and work. The name with which I started my new journey. I was never so sure about anything else in my life.

So finally, once again to repeat myself, the answer is a definite no.
I <u>do not</u> have an identity crisis.

4. Rachel.

It was 2016, the first semester in Gerrit Rietveld Academie. I did a workshop held by a guest teacher and after the workshop everyone was chilling at the back of the school. An assistant of the guest teacher asked my name, then she asked me what my Korean name was and what was the reason for changing my name. I simply answered: "my Korean name is Sun-Young but I never liked the idea that someone else chose my name and that I have to use that name for my entire life. So I decided to change it when I moved here." And then she laughed a bit and said : "At least your name isn't a super western name like Rachel. It would be weird if you chose Rachel as your name."
I remember that moment pretty clearly. It was sunset, people made small groups, I was in the same group with her, she was leaning against a tree and smoking. I was really new to Amsterdam and it was my first experience living abroad. Before moving to the Netherlands, I didn't travel that much and didn't meet many foreigners, so I didn't have a lot of experience with these kinds of situations. Also I was not aware about racism and its many forms, shapes and biases. I didn't know how I was supposed to feel in that situation.

I laughed with her.
I agreed with her.
And I buried this story in my mind until I started my thesis.

I think I already felt something was not right when that girl asked me about my name. And probably the reason that I buried that memory in my mind was because I was ashamed that I couldn't say anything in that situation and agreed with her. I hope people who are reading this text understand my struggle, but for those who don't see any problem in this situation I will explain a bit.

Firstly, 'Alma' is pretty much western name. The origin of 'Alma' is Latin and it's quite a popular name in Sweden, Spain and Norway. But probably this name sounded a bit exotic or not familiar for that girl, and so she thought it was a good choice. How ironic.
Also because I'm from Asia, is it so strange and wrong that I should have Western-ish name? What about adopted asian kids? If adoptive parents give them a Western name are you also going to say that it's a bad choice for the kid?

Secondly, this is a choice I've made for myself. Not for anyone else's comfort and ease of 'understanding'.

Why is it that people who have to feel bad or guilty don't feel anything? And the people who should not feel bad or guilty do feel bad and guilty?
How easily people can say "I didn't mean it." Or "don't take it personally".

5. Hey, Important question. Is 'Surreal' your real surname? If it is then that's pretty surreal.

Yes, having the surname 'Surreal' can be surreal if someone has that as a last name. But also why not?
I use 'Surreal' as my last name on Facebook. I didn't want to use 'Kim'. I didn't want people to immediately apply their stereotypes on to me, so in a way, this was a kind of self protection because of the experiences I've had with people's prejudices. Choosing a different surname was a reflection of my tiredness.
 Recently I've been thinking of using a different last name. 'Kim' is my father's family name. The name only male members of the family can continue. It is a name from ancestors, roots that I don't know well and something that does not exist clearly for me. Especially in Korea, people used to think that boys were more precious and important than girls, because being a boy, he could continue the family name. When a girl marries she becomes part of her husband's family. We can easily see this idea in big holidays.
In Seollal(Lunar New Year) and Chuseok(Korean Thanksgiving),
Korean families hold memorial services called Charye in honor of their ancestors. For this, female members usually prepare all the food but they can't join the ceremony. Nowadays it's slowly changing, so some families prepare things together and do the ceremony together. In my family, men start the ceremony first and when they are done they say 'if you girls want to do it, you can do it'. So I always joined the ceremony but except for me no one really joined.

It's a type of segregation. I was born in segregation, raised in segregation. It was mostly unconscious and deeply entrenched segregation and it made people think that there was no segregation. And if someone mentions this word, or that there is segregation, that person becomes a trouble maker. Dividing of male and female as segregation, the treatment of women as second class citizens in my country is segregation, the sacrifices that my mom has had to make because of her being female is segregation, the "othering" of myself by people I encounter everyday, the daily microaggressions i face is segregation.

My parents always taught me "family is the most important thing in the world, family is the only thing you can trust and rely on." They forced me to think in this way. To me, it feels like being brainwashed. This feeling of family has never come naturally to me, it has always been forced on me. They also said "You should behave well.", " Don't shame the family name".

I feel choked by this idea. The concept of family. The things that continue from a long long time ago. And the things I can't resist. Am I a member of family or can I be myself?

 So, using 'Surreal' as my last name on Facebook was part of my struggle. I'm still struggling but I have a bit more clear vision of it. I am just me. I'm not the person you assume me to be. I'm not the person you're naming and labelling. I'm not the person you can judge without knowing all of my history.

So once again, my name is Alma. I'm not from Spain. Not from Portugal. Also not from Poland or Finland. I'm from Korea and I gave 'Alma' as a new name to myself. People who have a bit of knowledge about Asia, they wonder about my name. What I have written down here, in this thesis document is extremely personal. While this text for me has been a way to learn, study and understand more about myself, I also hope that it facilitates the reader to understand others more.
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