

A Small Turquoise Wooden Bead
by Nadja Bartlebaugh

My parents brought together by the fate of the universe, an airplane, and my father's stationing at the United States Embassy in Indonesia, held me in their arms as I took my first breaths towards a larger picture on Earth. Staring down into my brown eyes composed of 50% of each of their DNA, they named me Thurayyanadja. As many letters as half of the alphabet, an unconsidered contender for most misspelled word of all time, and mispronounced on rosters everywhere, my name, Thurayyanadja, encapsulates the integration of two cultures colliding to form one, all in respects to its own. Google "Thurayyanadja" and stump the search engine as it navigates through the worldwide web and returns with basically nothing. Seven billion people inhabit the earth, yet, I am very possibly the only Thurayyanadja in the world.

I spent my childhood vacations hopelessly twirling racks around in countless circles, desperately searching for one souvenir only: a keychain with my name on it. Obviously, my dreams crumbled into disappointment at every street vendor and airport gift store I've encountered, unaware I was following such an impossible, unattainable goal. I was so jealous of anything that my little brother, Aidan, collected with his name engraved on it. All I wanted, selfishly, was one souvenir with my name on it.

Believing that I was going to find a keychain with Thurayyanadja on it was like believing in Santa Claus, both a hopeful innocence about a nonexistent distribution of novelties. I gave up on the idea of Santa when I was 8, but I didn't give up on the idea of finding a Thurayyanadja keychain until I was 15, ready to visit my aunt in Europe and explore an entirely new continent for souvenirs.

Admiring the cobblestone streets contrasted by the subtle motion of river ripples, I reached peace in the midst of Gouda, Netherlands when a little boy with bleach blonde hair who looked as if he jumped off the cover of *The Little Prince* approached me. I could not understand a word he was saying, for the obvious reasons that I did not understand baby babble or Dutch. Still, we communicated: waving, making funny faces, then laughing together. Bestowing a turquoise wooden bead no bigger than the size of a pea, his little fingers dropped it into my hand and walked away.

When I look in the mirror, I stare at the small turquoise wooden bead hanging on my necklace. I can picture the little boy handing me the bead, walking away with his parents on the street lined with red flowers and bicycles towards the river reflecting the summer sun. I see the reflection of a girl who just experienced an epiphany indirectly from an unexpected encounter with a stranger a fourth of my age from a foreign country.

I spent the entirety of my childhood vacations searching for a keychain with my name on it. I may not have found exactly what I was looking for, but I found that the story behind something is more valuable than the thing itself. Souvenirs are not just keychains, magnets, or postcards; they are narratives representing experiences with people from places that remind us that the world is a bigger and better place than what is within our comfort zone. My name, just like a souvenir, is a narrative too: the complex encompassment of the story of my parents, the combination of Arabic and Russian words meaning constellations and hope respectively, the perfect reminder that the world's diversity is intended to inevitably intertwine, and the beginning of a preposterous lifelong exploration in search of a keychain inscribed with Thurayyanadja. I know now, thanks to the gift of a small turquoise wooden bead, that a keychain with my name on it cannot sum that narrative up.