

## Ke-nee-bahl

*Cannibal*. Smatterings of blood and gore come to mind, but for me there is also shame and remembrance. I am 9 years old again, exposed for butchering this word. *He is a cannibal*, I read aloud, only to be met with my teacher's blank stare. Then, *oh! You mean a cannibal*. But he said it differently. 'Can' - like a can - followed by a short, sharp 'nah' and 'bull'. Whilst I'd been stressing the *knee* and taking the 'ba' out of 'lip balm.'

*Ke-nee-bahl*.

My teacher wouldn't let me live it down years later. 'Ke-nee-bahl' became his go-to anecdote in our English classes - proof that you could read plenty and still say things wrong. I chuckled - the first 4 or so times. Inwardly I wished to be swallowed alive by the copper carpet. But from there my list of mispronunciations only grew, uncovered in casual talk with friends: salmon, Fila, aluminium...

Undeterred from speaking, I represented our school at the rotary competition in Year 5. On the drive home, my father relayed to me that a judge had approached him asking where my accent was from. *She spoke beautifully, but I couldn't catch some words*. Which words, I wonder? My speech had included no cannibals, of that I was certain. Minute yet repeated embarrassments I'd firmly resolved to leave behind in primary; until they caught up to me in Year 10 Biology, while reading out materials to my lab partner.

"5 almonds-"

"See? She says it too! I told you it's *almonds*, not *ahhmonds*." A classmate with whom I'd exchanged zero words, pointing to me.

*Ahhhmonds*. Was this *salmon* all over again? I had yet to reconcile myself to 'L' being a silent placeholder for a drawling, say-Ahh-for-the-doctor vowel.

I smile shyly. "Guess it's an immigrant thing?" Words I instantly regret, perceiving the slight hunch and the defensiveness that leaks into his voice.

"What? It's not an *immigrant* thing." Nervous laughter, in between glancing back at his Aussie lab partners, who grin amicably. If I do not understand his aversion to this label, it is because I have long accepted that circumstance and genetic makeup render me a perpetual foreigner on Earth.

I could try to explain that I was born in the jewel of Southeast-Asia, where it's packed and sweaty and locals twitter in what is aptly named Singlish. And between the verbal idiosyncrasies of a Polish father and Jarkartan-slang-slinging mother, all the negatives

cancelled out leaving me: a child vaguely American in speech. Or Canadian, as I'm asked every other day at the hotel where I work.

Why do I write? For all its strange and self-contradicting rules, I *will* get a hold of this language called English. When I write, I bypass the liminal space between my mouth and your ear that gives birth to countless misunderstandings.

When you read these black letters, it will be in your own voice and  
My words - though we may say them differently –  
Will reach you all the same.