I was six years old in the first grade, and I was sitting at a table with my three best friends. We were all really similar. All of our moms bought us clothes from the Children’s Place, we all liked to play house during recess, and all our names started with the letter A. It was Ashaya, Alicia, and Aleeza.

We were working on a first-grade icebreaker project, which our teacher, Miss Pennington, had assigned to us. It was gonna be self-portraits that we could hang up on the wall and get to know each other’s faces and names. I was really excited for this project. I knew it was really special because there were three drafts. And we were working on the final draft, which was going to be colored in.

I was super stoked for this. Over the summer my mom had bought me this coloring book that taught me all these great techniques for how to draw properly, and I finally mastered coloring inside the lines. I was so excited to show my friends my new skills. I was basically young Picasso.

I also knew this was a special project because we were using oil pastels. I loved oil pastels—they’re really soft, so I would pinch off a little bit and melt it between my fingers. They were expensive for my public school in New York City, and so each table got one box. And each box had one of each color, so you had to be patient and wait for your color.

At this point I had colored in my shirt blue and the background green, and there was a little tree. I had drawn in all the features of my face, which the book had taught me to do first. I had drawn in my lips and my nose, and I was ready to color in my face.

All my friends had used the peach oil pastel to color in their faces, and since we were basically all the same girl, I would use peach, too. So finally, when it was available, I picked it up, and I started drawing so slowly, going around my lips and my eyes and coloring in all one direction. I was watching as the oil pastel melted into the paper and my face came alive, and I colored inside the lines.

When I looked down, it was like I was looking into a mirror. This girl I had just drawn was exactly how I saw myself. I felt my teacher, Miss Pennington, over my shoulder.

Miss Pennington loved it when people drew well, and so I was getting ready for her to praise me, to say, Aleeza, that is the most beautiful self-portrait I have ever seen. I’m gonna hang it above my desk so everyone who comes in can see it.

Instead Miss Pennington says, “Aleeza, that’s not your color.”

I’m confused by this, because I don’t understand how colors can belong to people.

But before I can find a way to ask her, she’s gone to the oil-pastel box and started looking for it. She doesn’t find the color that she’s looking for, and so she goes to the crayon bin.

Now, every school had this infamous crayon bin that had bits and pieces of gross crayons that had been rolling around in that bin forever, and I never went to the crayon bin. Nonetheless, Miss Pennington is rummaging through it, and she reaches in, and she pulls out this little nub of a brown crayon that’s unwrapped and gross.

And she hands it to me.

I’m still really confused by all this, but I notice my friends are staring at me, and my heart is beating really fast, and I want this to be over. So I just grab the crayon, and I start coloring in my face, and I’m going in all different directions. But wax crayon and oil pastel don’t mix together. They don’t
belong on the same paper. So it doesn’t matter how hard I’m pushing, because I can’t get the crayon to stick, and I’m coloring outside the lines.

When I look down at the paper, I am this grotesque monster that can’t decide if she wants to be peach or brown.

And I want to beg Miss Pennington, *Please don’t hang this up. I’ll do it all over again. I’ll use the colors that you want me to.*

But before I can find the right words, she’s taken my self-portrait and put it into a pile with all my even-toned peach friends, and it gets hung up.

That night I go home and I ask my mom why I wasn’t allowed to use peach. And she explained it as best you can to a six-year-old who’s just gone through an identity crisis.

She says, “You know, I’m not peach, and your dad isn’t peach. And since you’re our daughter, you’re not peach either.”

But this confused me even more, because my parents are just like my peach friends’ parents. They sound the same. They make the same small talk at school pickup. But they’re apparently not the same. And everyone seems to understand this concept of color. I’m not getting it, and I don’t want my mom to think that I’m stupid. So I don’t ask her anything further, and I try to not think about it.

But it wasn’t that easy. A couple months later, we had a day called International Day. We had it once a year at my elementary school, where everyone would dress up in the traditional clothing of the country that they’re from or that their parents are from and then march around the school. It was meant to celebrate diversity and heritage.

I hated International Day.

First off, my mom is from Afghanistan and my dad is from Pakistan, so each year I’d have to alternate who I marched with.

But no matter who I was marching with, they always seemed to understand the traditions better than I did, or they spoke Urdu or Farsi, which I did not. And so even though we were the same color, I didn’t belong with them completely, just like I apparently didn’t belong with my peach friends.

I didn’t know where I fit, and I was stuck in this color limbo.

But I finally graduated elementary school and moved on to sixth grade and thought I had left this whole concept of colors behind me.

So on the first day of sixth grade, I was really excited. It was a brand-new start, and we were all trying to get to know each other by asking questions, like, “Where’d you go to elementary school?” and “What’s your favorite book?”

And this one kid comes up to me and says, “What race are you?”

I had never been blatantly asked this question before, and so I didn’t have a prepared answer.

I thought back to Miss Pennington and that brown crayon, and I told him, “I’m brown.”

He gets this confused look on his face, and he says, “What do you mean you’re brown? Brown isn’t a race.”

And I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that I had finally said “I’m brown” and it still wasn’t enough. And then this little six-year-old girl deep inside of me gets angry. And then I get really angry.

And then I’m screaming at him.

I said, “You know what? If I say I’m brown, then that’s it! I’m BROWN!”

And he never spoke to me again.
Which was fine, because I had finally found the words to stand up for myself, and I had finally come to terms with who I was.

I want to say that was the end of it, that because I was, you know, okay with who I was, that I never had to stand up for myself or defend my race again. But that just wasn’t true. I was growing up in post-9/11 New York City, where being brown put me in this category of “other,” and I have been questioned about who I was many times after that.

I had to reaffirm over and over that “I’m brown, I’m brown, I’m brown,” because nothing anyone says to me will ever make me question that again. I’ve worked so hard to love the skin I’m in, and nothing anyone says can take that away from me.

Today if you ask me to draw a self-portrait, I’d draw a confident young woman who’s proud of her Afghan and Pakistani heritage, who is a proud American. And I would find the most beautiful, soft brown oil pastel to color in my face. No one would have to tell me to pick it up. It would be my first choice.