

# Break Through

Welcome to Break Through! This website contains a creative writing booklet that I worked on for my AHS (Art, Humanities, and Social Sciences) Capstone project. The booklet contains three writing pieces, which are all centered around a general theme of breaking through the shields we put up and the bubbles enclosing us. Each piece is matched with a writing prompt, included at the end of the story, and some related recipes. The recipes either involve a food item that is depicted within the story or are closely related in another aspect.

When I was brainstorming booklet ideas at the beginning of the semester, I started with a theme of extending beyond boundaries. However, as I started writing the stories, I realized that they didn't quite fit the theme. For a period of time, my booklet was theme-less. After I finalized the pieces, I read them over again and realized that they all have something to do with the dynamics between human connection and our personal bubbles. Personal bubbles can mean different things: a safe haven where we are protected, a feeling of isolation from the rest of the world, or a perspective that we are stuck in. All of the pieces involve some form of personal bubble being broken but with varying perspectives.

"Soul Mirrors" tells the story of a young woman who grew up with a literal bubble (i.e. soul mirror) around her. The bubble prevented her from seeing the world around her and forming connections with others. With the help of her Grandma, she begins to learn more about her surroundings. However, after her Grandma passes away, she breaks her soul mirror in anger. Without a bubble surrounding her anymore, the main character can see and connect with other people's soul mirrors. This story describes a personal bubble being broken almost impulsively but with positive outcomes.

"The Asian Fail" talks about my personal experiences with growing up in the Bay Area, where getting a grade less than an A is considered a failure. There are several bubbles in this story. Chapter 2 describes the bubble of a carefree childhood that wrapped around me in elementary school. I stubbornly tried to protect that bubble by not caring about the outside pressures of getting good grades. However, when I entered middle school, the bubble shattered as I started to adapt to the Asian studying culture. In place of the childhood bubble, a new one formed, which involved being a perfectionist who feared imperfect grades. A majority of the piece discusses this new bubble, and my desires to slowly break through it.

"Shortbread Cookies" describes home as a bubble that is bound to burst. Growing children are like gases that keep pushing on the walls of the bubble, and the pressure eventually becomes so great that the walls burst, and the children are released as adults into the greater world. The narrator in this story left her bubble three years ago but feels nostalgic about it. She decides to bake some cookies to bring with her as she visits the home she left behind so long ago.

## Table of contents

Instead of browsing the cards on the home page, you can use this table of contents to access the stories or recipes you are most interested in

- “Soul Mirrors” (link)
  - Recipe: Pumpkin Bread (link)
- “The Asian Fail” (link)
  - Recipe for Chapter 1: Lemon Blueberry Cornmeal Cake (link)
  - Recipe for Chapter 2: Pineapple Buns (link)
  - Recipe for Chapter 3: Marble Bundt Cake (link)
- “Shortbread Cookies” (link)
  - Recipe: Mailänderli Cookies (link)

## Annotated bibliography

I referenced a bunch of different sources while writing my booklet.

### General inspiring and how-to sources

- *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean* by Kirsty Murray
  - This anthology was a huge source of inspiration for me because it includes short stories from a bunch of different authors all focused on the theme of women empowerment. I really like how there are stories with a bunch of different genres (e.g. historical and science fiction), and I tried to emulate that in my own booklet
- Masterclass “Writing the Middle and the Ending” with Margaret Atwood
  - I followed this Masterclass course to get advice on completing my longer short stories. I wanted to learn how to create an engaging middle and ending since I typically struggle with outlining those parts in a story
- Masterclass “The Art of Storytelling” with Neil Gaman
  - I love Neil Gaman’s work and wanted to listen to his writing advice. I followed this Masterclass whenever I was in a writing slump and needed to feel motivated again to work on my booklet

### Sources for “Soul Mirrors”

- “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez ([source](#))
  - This is a magical realism short story that describes a realistic reaction to a character having large wings. The story also has a detached tone that makes the story seem sadder. I read this story before writing “Soul Mirrors” to find examples on how to naturally blend reality and fantasy
- *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* by Leslye Walton

- This is one of my favorite magical realism stories because its imagery is breathtaking. I tried writing my flashback description scenes in “Soul Mirrors” based on this book’s writing style since it’s so effective
- *The Bear and the Nightingale* by Katherine Arden
  - This is another book with beautiful imagery that I admire. The story takes place in Russia during the 14th century and blends historical events with Russian fairytales. The story vividly describes the Russian winter season to the point where I can almost feel it as a reader. Arden personifies nature and the weather masterfully, and I drew inspiration from her writing for the imagery within “Soul Mirrors”

### Sources for “The Asian Fail”

- *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua
  - I read this book a few years ago, and the extreme parenting methods described in it still seem fresh in my mind, especially when I hear various crazy things that Lynbrook parents did while I was in high school. The author’s daughters are also half asian and half white, which relates to my personal experiences

### Sources for “Shortbread Cookies”

- *How Baking Works: Exploring the Fundamentals of Baking Science* by Paula I. Figoni
  - This book explains the baking science that I used to explain an analogy in my story. I paid particular attention to the chapters on what happens when a baked good is in the oven
- “Angels and Blueberries” by Tara Campbell ([source](#))
  - This short story was recommended to me by my friend, Jessie. The rationale behind the story is similar to what I tried to do in “Shortbread Cookies” by explaining a scientific concept in a creative way. I really like the second person format of the story and how adorable and hilarious it is. I attempted to do something similar in my story

### A big thank you

Thank you for coming this far in the introduction! I hope you enjoy browsing through this booklet. In case you have any questions, you can email me at [coverney@olin.edu](mailto:coverney@olin.edu). I would also like to thank a few more people for all their help throughout the semester

- **Gillian:** thank you for giving so much amazing feedback on my stories. They wouldn’t have been as good without your guidance
- **Jessie:** thank you for being an amazing writing buddy. You encouraged me to keep on writing even when I was in a slump
- **Mom, dad, and bro:** thank you to my family members for bearing with me when I asked a bunch of questions about my childhood. Also, thank you for making so many cameos in my pieces

- **Yichen:** thank you for giving me amazing feedback on my story ideas. I loved sharing them with you and hearing your reactions
- **Everyone in the AHS Capstone class:** thank you to everyone in the AHS Capstone class for giving me a ton of feedback on my work throughout the semester (special shout out to **Amy**, who read all my stories and gave me some great reader impressions)

## Short descriptions that go in the home page

- Not sure where to go? Click here for a quick intro!
- Magical realism story in a world where everyone has a unique soul mirror
- A simple pumpkin bread recipe that is mentioned in "Soul Mirrors"
- Memoir about my personal experiences with the Asian Fail (any grade that is less than perfect)
- Recipe for a cake that is perfect when you are feeling down, like when you get an Asian Fail
- A treat that I constantly asked for in elementary school when my parents wanted to drag me to an after-school program that I didn't like before I cared about Asian Fails
- A filling dessert with chocolate and vanilla components, representing my multiracial background, which complicates my relationship with the Asian Fail
- A short story about a hypothetical future me baking cookies to reconnect with family members after being away from home for a long time
- The recipe for the cookies that I make in "Shortbread Cookies"

## “Soul Mirrors” writing prompt

Choose one of the art pieces below and write a story based on what you see, feel, or get inspired by while looking at the artwork. You don't need to know anything about the art piece. Just see where it takes you.



Day and Night (1938) by MC Escher ([source](#))



Yellow-Red-Blue (1925) by Wassily Kandinsky ([source](#))



Morning Sun (1952) by Edward Hopper ([source](#))



Untitled (1964) by Lee Bontecou ([source](#))

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### Inspiration behind writing prompt

I came up with the idea of soul mirrors while studying Kevin Beasley's acoustic mirrors at the Institute of Contemporary Art. The motley collection of garments and baseball caps appeared to represent a person's personality. Furthermore, the shape of the mirror produced strange echoes, which made it feel like it was whispering back to me. I began to imagine that everyone had one of these acoustic mirrors, which reflected back an aspect of their personality. After some brainstorming, I decided to name them soul mirrors.



Untitled 11 (2015) by Kevin Beasley ([source](#))

[Click here](#) to access the pumpkin bread recipe, which goes with this story!

## “The Asian Fail” writing prompt

1. Think of a problem you are currently facing with lots of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors at play
  2. Draw the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (it could be a Venn diagram, drawing, or other visual representation of how the intrinsic and extrinsic factors relate to each other)
  3. Indicate (e.g. circle, highlight, or underline) the strongest motivator. Write a bit about why it's the strongest
  4. Pick between these two options (you don't have to use the same motivator from part 3)
    - a. Transcribe an internal debate with the motivator that bothers you the most
    - b. Write a thank you note to the motivator that you most value
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### Inspiration behind writing prompt

“The Asian Fail” is an example of a situation, in which intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are in conflict. Throughout the piece, I battle with how the Bay Area Asian school culture impacted the way I learn. Fearing an Asian Fail was an extrinsic motivation that powered most of my educational accomplishments. It is a motivational factor that I delve into and, through the process, try to weaken.

There are three recipes that go with this story. [Click here](#) for chapter 1's recipe (cornmeal cake), [here](#) for chapter 2's recipe (pineapple buns), and [here](#) for chapter 3's recipe (marble bundt cake).

## “Shortbread Cookies” writing prompt

Find a recipe of something you made to connect with other people (either while meeting new acquaintances or reconnecting with old friends). Describe the time you followed the recipe, considering any of the following questions if they are helpful

- Who did you make it for?
  - When did you make it?
  - Why did you make it for that particular event?
  - How was it received?
  - Did anything unexpected happen during the process?
  - What would you have done differently?
  - Did you ever make it again? If so, did you make any tweaks to the recipe?
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## Inspiration behind writing prompt

“Shortbread Cookies” is all about a hypothetical future me baking some cookies to reconnect with my family members after not seeing them for three years. The writing prompt targets a similar question by asking people to find a recipe they made to connect with others.

[Click here to access the shortbread cookie recipe, which goes with this story!](#)

# Soul Mirrors

*“The most beautiful journeys are waiting outside your window.”*

Sure thing, Grandma, but are you even allowed to go on a journey during the pandemic? It’s been ages since I’ve eaten pho or met up with college friends. I was going to get an all-expense-paid trip to a conference in Seoul but that “journey” flew out the window when the whole world went on lockdown mode. But really, I shouldn’t be complaining. I’m actually not doing too badly. Didn’t lose my job or get sick. And I guess, these afternoon walks are sort of journey-like, though I don’t go on them for the fresh air. There isn’t much of that behind two masks. I go walking to interact with people’s soul mirrors, socially distanced of course.

While fellow-walkers stuff their hands in sweatshirt pockets and quickly trudge past me without a second glance, their soul mirrors whip around them at glaring speed, trying to protect their owners from any threat to the delicate “new normal”. CDs, frisbee discs, turtle shells, and glass bubbles, they all try their hardest regardless of size. Yet there is only so much a soul mirror can deflect. When the pain is too great, they crack, maybe even chip away. Over time, soul mirrors become badges of honor, depicting all the difficulties their owners overcame. I search for those badges to understand their history and to admire the light peeking through the scars.

A college student walks toward me now. She is in her own little world, wearing over-the-ear bluetooth headphones. Scrunched-up shoulders form a border around a military-green trench coat with a half-attached iron-on patch dangling from one sleeve. Her soul mirror is bouncing along next to her, a giant salad bowl, overflowing with rainbow silk scarves and bright flowers. The saturated colors disguise little bullet wounds scattered across the salad bowl. Where are those from?

*That time in 3rd grade when no one wanted to play with her, and she sat by herself in the playground during recess. A Saturday morning, when all the other girls made fun of her in dance class for mixing up “burgers” and “boogers”. They chased her out of the dance studio after she said that she liked eating boogers. In AP Chinese, when her high school crush told her that he liked someone else before she even gathered enough courage to confess. The rapid succession of*

*rejections when she thought that she had what it took to get into an Ivy League School. She didn't. Last semester, when she experienced her first Asian Fail in the form of a sinful A- on her transcript. Not being able to see her brother in Switzerland for over a year. Always putting too much on her plate and not knowing when to stop and say no to things. Constantly drowning and over-promising. Having no idea where to go next year with no more semesters at college to look forward to. Angry at everyone close to her for caring about her. Angry at the world for messing up everything. Angry at herself for being angry.*

My heart hurts and fumes with her. Even though the girl has never seen her soul mirror, the colorful bowl will stubbornly stay with her until the end, protecting her but also keeping all the hurt constantly within reach. Only those who are aware and willingly break their soul mirrors can be free from this blessing and burden.

Good afternoon, I tell her. The student quickly looks up from the ground and glances in my direction. I stare into troubled milk-chocolate eyes. She can't see my smile, so I raise my hand in greeting.

*Hello*, she returns. I imagine a delicate smile hiding behind her black mask. With perfect Covid-19 etiquette, we pass each other on the sidewalk. I'm walking nearly on someone's front yard, and the girl is stepping onto the road to maintain our distance. Her soul mirror glows silver briefly before it escapes my peripheral vision. I sense my own soul mirror wrap around me. A glowing green blanket that blocks out my vision and smells like cinnamon. After a few breaths, the warmth dissipates, and I'm by myself again. That's when I miss my soul mirror the most.

It's been gone for almost a decade now. The green bubble that you tried so hard to coax me out of years ago with delicious baked treats. I remember the sound of the wind flowing past my window as my parents drove me to your little cottage, so I could escape the noisy city. Mom told me that it was autumn because the trees were covered in blankets of sunrise, but I couldn't see the golden and red leaves, just the shimmering walls of my soul mirror. After I arrived and heard the rumbling noises of dad's Honda driving away, you caressed my hair and guided me to the kitchen for my first lesson.

That's when I finally met the fall season. The spicy and sugary scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. I heard the high-pitched creaking sound of an opening door, and a

warm breeze passed through my protective orb. With your hand over mine, I brought a cold metal utensil to my mouth and took a bite of autumn. It was soft and moist.

*What do you feel?* You asked me.

I widened my eyes in surprise. It had been a while since I got that question. Everyone else just asked about what I could or couldn't see. I was curious about you and peered into the glimmering shapes in my soul mirror. I think I caught a glimpse of your smile, a thin patch of light a bit brighter than its surroundings. A dark shadow materialized in my vision, gently hovering in front of me. You said it was something called pumpkin bread, the best treat to eat when it started getting colder. I reached toward the sweet heat source for another bite.

A few days later, you showed me a rectangular wild mushroom tart and then a circular german chocolate cake. When you took me outside to your precious herb garden, I saw little dashes in the rosemary shrub and floating buttons among the cherry tomato varieties. With you, the world was blurry in a happy and fluffy kind of way, like we were living inside a large white cotton ball.

When you passed away, the cotton ball became a dark licorice jawbreaker. The shadows outside my soul mirror grew blacker and longer without your bright smile. I was a little kid trapped in bed scared of the monsters hiding in the closet. I could only bear it for a few days before my soul mirror fractured on the way to the city cemetery. A piece near my left eye chipped away, a clear little disk that fell onto my lap and quickly evaporated. I looked out the window of dad's brand-new Honda Accord and finally saw the brilliance of autumn's sunrise. It was beautiful and that made me angry. How could the world still be so beautiful without you next to me? How dare my soul mirror hide so much when I was at my happiest?

I pounded my fists against the front of my soul mirror, enlarging the cracks beginning to spread across my little bubble. With a soft popping sound, my soul mirror shattered into tiny fragments. The pieces fluttered in the air for a second, reflecting the brilliant reds, yellows, and golds outside my window before they shimmered to mist and disappeared.

A rush of colors and light flooded around me, replacing the space where my soul mirror used to be. I looked ahead to study my parents for the first time. My mom was staring sadly through her window, a black bun loosely tied to the back of her head. Her soul mirror sat in front of her like a makeshift airbag, a red dinner plate with one large crack zigzagging across the middle. A crack that recently got larger when you left us. My dad's unruly yellow hair was slicked back, trying to match with the black tuxedo he was wearing. His soul mirror, a basket weaved from book pages, hovered protectively around my mom, trying to support the sagging dinner plate.

It was strange to see my parent's soul mirrors and their cracks. It made me wonder what cracks were on your soul mirror. I'm sad that I never got to see that part of you, but I'm no longer hiding within a green bubble. My window is wide open to all kinds of journeys, fun or difficult.

# Pumpkin Bread



*That's when I finally met the fall season. The spicy and sugary scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger. I heard the high-pitched creaking sound of an opening door, and a warm breeze passed through my protective orb. With your hand over mine, I brought a cold metal utensil to my mouth and took a bite of autumn. It was soft and moist.*

This recipe is matched with “Soul Mirrors” (link to piece). Pumpkin bread is the first treat that the main character receives when she visits her Grandmother’s house. It is the perfect sweet to eat during the fall season. Through this recipe, I wanted to share the warmth and joy I get whenever I eat a bite of pumpkin bread. The recipe is based on Preppy Kitchen’s [pumpkin bread recipe](#) with a few modifications.

*Recipe makes one 9x5 inch bread*

## Ingredients (left column)

### Equipment

- 9x5 inch loaf pan (greased with oil or butter)
- Two mixing bowls (one large, one medium)
- Whisk/electric mixer
- Rubber spatula
- Scale and/or measuring cups (I like to use a scale for dry ingredients and measuring cups for liquids)

### Bread

- 1 3/4 cups (210 grams) all-purpose flour<sup>1</sup>
- 1 tsp (4.8 grams) baking soda
- 1/2 tsp (2.4 grams) baking powder

- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 1/2 tsps cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp nutmeg
- Additional autumn spices<sup>2</sup>
- 2 eggs at room temperature
- 1/2 cup (100 grams) brown sugar
- 1/2 cup (100 grams) granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup (61.3 grams) whole milk
- 1 1/3 cups (~387 grams) pumpkin puree<sup>3</sup>
- 1/2 cup (120 grams) vegetable oil
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

## Instructions (right column)

1. **Preheat:** preheat oven to 350°F
1. **Mix the dry ingredients:** in a large mixing bowl, combine the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and spices. Stir until ingredients are well distributed
2. **Mix the wet ingredients:** in a medium mixing bowl, combine the sugar and oil. Mix until well combined. Add the eggs and mix until incorporated. Add in the milk, pumpkin puree, and vanilla extract. Whisk everything together until smooth
3. **Add wet to dry:** pour the wet ingredients into the mixing bowl containing the dry ingredients and fold together with a rubber spatula until all traces of flour disappear<sup>4</sup>. The batter should be slightly runny and contain minimal clumps
4. **Final touches before baking:** pour the batter into the greased loaf pan. Slide the pan gently back and forth to evenly distribute the dough
5. **Bake:** bake the bread at 350°F between 1 hour and 1 hour 10 minutes<sup>5</sup>. It's done when a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean, and the bread has a slight spring when lightly pressed
6. **Cool:** After you take out the bread, cool until slightly warm before flipping the bread onto a serving plate to eat. You can also directly serve from the loaf pan

## Tips and Tricks

1. If you want to make it gluten free, I recommend adding 140 grams of all-purpose gluten free flour and 70 grams of almond flour
2. You can add your favorite fall spices here. I usually like to add 1/4 tsp of cardamom, 1/4 tsp of chinese 5 spice, and 1/4 tsp of cayenne pepper. You can also add 1/2 tsp of allspice

3. Use 100% pumpkin puree. A 15 oz can contains a little less than 2 cups. I tried using the whole can before, and the bread still turned out great, so try it out if you don't want to have leftovers. You can also make your own pumpkin puree, which isn't too complicated. I would recommend [this recipe](#)
4. Mix until just combined. You don't want to overmix, especially if you are using regular flour since the gluten will start coagulating, which would make the bread less soft
5. If you want the top of the bread to be less crusty/hard, then you can cover the loaf pan with an aluminum foil after being 40 minutes in the oven

# The Asian Fail

## Chapter 1: My first bad grade

I always thought that I wouldn't be bothered by an Asian Fail. I was obviously above that, and it didn't even really apply to me. Grades didn't feel like the most important thing, learning was, of course. While my classmates studied like crazy to land on the better side of the dangerous A/A- boundary, I read the textbook over and over again because I was interested in the content. But it's easy to think that when you Ace every single class without the fear of getting an A-. I thought an Asian Fail wouldn't impact me until I got my first A- at Olin.

I received my first Asian Fail during the fall semester of my senior year at Olin. Like getting an injury just meters away from the end of the marathon! I won't delve into exactly how I got my first A-, because I don't actually know why thanks to some mysterious and subjective grading scheme. (Clearly I am completely over it and not bitter at all!)

Anyways, I opened up my unofficial transcript— on a whim, since I never stalk my Olin account around the time grades are supposed to come out— and encountered the classic Asian Fail in the form of an ugly A-. At first, I thought the minus sign was some fleck of dust on my computer monitor. After scrolling back and forth, I realized its true identity. During the next few hours, the thought that I actually learned a lot in that class didn't cross my mind once. I was shocked and extremely pissed. My perfect streak was broken! I epically failed, and my student status will now plummet down the ranks.

I confessed my failure to my family, and they completely sympathized with me telling me that it was horrible and that I should send an email to the teacher for clarification. My dad complained about how Olin got rid of letter grades last semester when I was doing well in all of my classes and decided to give out grades for the semester when I was most negatively impacted by the pandemic. My mom tried to comfort me, saying that she thought my work looked great and that the teacher did not properly adjust his expectations. My brother sighed and told me that he was super disappointed because now he couldn't brag about me to his friends anymore. (I think he was joking?)

I also admitted my Asian Fail to my partner, who went through the most competitive high school in Shanghai where they publicly ranked students for every test, and he had a completely different reaction. He didn't understand why I was in so much pain. I didn't have to share my grades with my classmates, and my GPA was already high enough for grad school. I was being overly dramatic. Maybe I was acting like a drama queen, but getting an A- was a huge deal to me. Now that a few weeks have passed, I'm sort of in the acceptance stage— as long as I never look at my transcript ever again. Seriously, I'm never downloading that file again.

You might be thinking something like *come on, there's no way you didn't get your first A- until senior year of college*. I know that's hard to believe, especially since I claim to prioritize learning over getting good grades, but let me clarify a few things. I did get A-'s in the past and plenty of worse grades, but that was in elementary school. Ever since 7th grade, I haven't gotten anything less than an A, until recently. So my streak isn't that flawless, in case that makes me more trustworthy. Also, I said that I worked so hard in my classes because I love learning, but actually, I sort of conditioned myself to believe that, so I could do what was necessary to succeed in every class. It was my brain's way of coping with the endless pile of work on my plate. Convincing me that I loved what I was doing and that yes, I did want to read the chemistry textbook instead of my YA fantasy novel during breakfast every morning. This persuasion was how I survived Lynbrook High School without buckling from all the competition and stress.

My high school has a stereotypical type of student: Asian, hardworking, takes as many AP classes as possible, and is determined to get a 4.0 GPA. My friend, Sarah, employed a dozen tactics to get an A in AP Chemistry and even paid lots of money to attend a selective Lynbrook AP Chem study group organized by one of those huge SAT prep companies. One of my closest childhood friends, Katie, was terrified to get an Asian Fail because of her mom. Katie's mom would check her SchoolLoop grade portal several times a day and immediately message Katie if there was any grade lower than an A-. That sounds pretty intense right?

Well, many people were even more extreme. There was a huge cheating problem at my school, which I witnessed first-hand in AP Physics in the form of answer keys being passed around right before a test. A bunch of Chinese parents made a WeChat group

where they constantly posted their kids' achievements and compared scores. Some parents bled thousands of dollars to get their kids into good colleges by purchasing professional counseling services and shipping their kids off to third-world countries to build houses for the sake of more eye-catching extracurriculars. I have heard about students with borderline grades giving some pretty lavish Christmas gifts to their teachers. A few of my high school teachers complained about parents who constantly sent them emails and demanded 1-1 meetings whenever their kids got a question wrong on a test or quiz. The parent-teacher dynamics got so bad at my school that teachers refused to communicate at all with parents, and my school changed their grading scale by getting rid of all the minus grades.

I'm not trying to purposefully keep myself separate from all of these crazy descriptions about my high school. I was just as invested in my performance as everyone else. I was my own helicopter parent. My mom and dad didn't even know my class schedule or what clubs I led but that was fine. My parents didn't need to get involved in my studies because if I got a score less than an A, I was the one sending emails to my teachers for more feedback. Though I got to admit that I was a lot more diplomatic and affable than those aggressive parents.

In 9th grade literature class, I received a horrendous A- or B on my first essay. I was determined to raise my grade, so I went to the teacher during every single tutorial session and asked for feedback on my writing assignments. For my second essay, I asked her to give me feedback on my writing several times before she graded it. I got like 100/100 on that essay and kept up the streak for the rest of the semester. I definitely learned a lot from all of the extra feedback I got, and I enjoyed critically analyzing interesting books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Fahrenheit 451*. But I would be lying if I said I did all of that just because I was interested in the subject matter. I cared so much about my writing because I didn't want to get an Asian Fail on it, and I'm still a bit scared to get one.

## Chapter 2: Unintended transformation

I didn't always care about getting an Asian Fail. When I was in elementary school, I was the complete opposite type of student. At the time, grades were in the form of numbers where 1 meant capital F fail and 6 meant excellent. I went through most of elementary

school as a cheerful girl content with getting 3s. My first and only 6 was for a poster on bees that I did in my first grade Chinese class. I don't know if it counts because my parents did most of the work. My mom came up with the poster content that I copied in my own handwriting, and my dad printed out bee clipart images that he had me trace over and color. In general, all of my elementary-school projects became a joint family effort. I would go to my parents the day before a big assignment was due and tell them about it for the first time. I made sure to put on an innocent but guilty expression, so my parents wouldn't waste time lecturing me. Instead they would pull on their hair, call for my brother, and start dividing up the work among themselves. My dad usually took care of the images; my mom was an expert on putting border tape on poster boards; and my brother did all the weird stuff like creating models of Native American villages. That's where I learned the importance of delegating work to other people. I was just living up to my initials, the natural C.E.O.

Except for projects, I avoided doing homework at all costs. Projects were important because I had to share them with my classmates. There was no way that I was going to hang up a loser poster on the wall. It had to be one of the best looking ones in the room. Homework, on the other hand, was something I shoved into my closet for later, which is probably why I ended up with so many 3s. I literally have no memories of ever doing homework in elementary school. While taking tests, I spent more effort doodling on the pages and writing my name as neatly as possible than actually trying to solve the questions. I was every Asian parent's nightmare. My biggest accomplishment in 4th grade was organizing a black market in my class for students to trade pencils and animal squishies without telling the teachers. One of my best trade deals involved giving Kerry some random scented waxing liquid that I found in my mom's bathroom cabinet for five brand-new mechanical pencils and a super cute green frog squishy. At home, I had even less of a reason to do any schoolwork. Why would I when I had all of my barbies and polly pockets to play with? I spent my afternoons pretending to do homework when I was actually roleplaying crazy adventures with my favorite toys. Even bugging my brother and distracting him from his homework was more entertaining than completing cursive-writing worksheets.

When I entered 3rd grade, my parents started to get more concerned about my low grades. Before then, they were super busy with work, and my brother was dealing with some pretty serious bullying problems that took up their attention. My brother also

didn't have the most amazing grades, which made my parents super anxious because he was approaching high school when grades started to matter. I was able to run free for those first few years in elementary school, but that freedom became much more limited when my parents banished me to a Chinese after-school program called Little Genius for most days of the week. It was torture! I was forced to do my homework and take extra classes with inferior snack options. Seriously, I don't get why adults think kids like plain animal crackers when cheez-its, oreos and frosted circus animal cookies exist in the world. I kept getting into arguments with one of my English teachers until I got kicked out and spent most of Chinese class trying to convince my teacher to let me raid the snack closet. Most of the time, I was banished to the homework room with zero toys and only a small white bookshelf with boring children's classics. All the other students actually did their homework, so I barely had anyone to play with. Sometimes, I completed grammar and math worksheets out of boredom, which my teachers considered to be a great success on their part.

I hated Little Genius so much that I devised all kinds of sound arguments to convince my dad not to drive me there. My reasons ranged from I have a stomach ache to I have a really, really bad stomach ache. One time, I was a bit more creative and quite accidentally discovered the power of pathos. When my dad drove me in front of Little Genius and got ready to walk me across the parking lot to the miserable building, a wave of desperation passed through me, and tears started welling in my eyes. I tapped on my dad's shoulder and pointed at the Little Genius building while whispering, "daddy, don't make me go. They torture people in there!" My dad was so amused by my little performance that he decided to let me off the hook this time and drove me to his company where I bought chocolate bars from the vending machine and a vanilla bean smoothie from Starbucks.

Whenever I didn't succeed in convincing my dad not to send me to Little Genius, I forced him to buy me bubble tea and pineapple buns from the food court next to the after-school program. My mom was a bit harder to convince. She rarely came to pick me up early from Little Genius even if I called her on the phone and told her that I wanted to go home. Since it was worth the risk, I always asked if we could buy more snacks from the food court before leaving. Sometimes, she said yes, and I got treats before and after experiencing hell. Those Little Genius days weren't too bad.

Near the end of 4th grade, my metamorphosis into the student I am today began. Through my brother's school experience, my parents learned that in 5th grade everyone in the Bay Area takes a math test, which determines whether they can skip a year of math when entering middle school. Many students are able to score high enough to pass the threshold, and my parents wanted me to hop onto that bandwagon. I was no longer able to skip Little Genius, especially the math classes, and I was "strongly encouraged" to do my homework. Even worse, I had to attend weekend math sessions taught by my dad. Every Saturday, I would spend half the day progressing through the 5th grade and 6th grade math textbooks.

Going from doing almost zero work to being forced to learn all of the math that I was trying to avoid for years wasn't easy. I may have thrown a few fits, but I trudged along because I knew that the upcoming math placement test was the most important math test I was going to take in my life. I knew that the test would determine which math class I would be taking in 6th grade, and I, sure as hell, wanted to be in the more prestigious class. There was no way I was going to seem so obviously inferior to my classmates. I wanted to be one of the special kids who could be seen walking from the 6th grade zone to the 7th and 8th grade classrooms for a fancy math class. I worked my butt off. Well, I worked as hard as I could without giving up any snack time or "official" play time. In 5th grade, I took that math test and scored high enough to skip a year in math. That year, I also got my first 5 in math and scored a 600/600 on the STAR test.

During 6th grade, I attempted to backtrack to my carefree learning mentality from before. I passed that math test and didn't have to go to Little Genius anymore. I could put all the horrors of hard work behind me and play to the fullest. I tried that for a few months until I started to realize that I was failing the special Pre-Algebra class that I worked so hard to get into. At first, some sucky test scores didn't bother me. It's not like I didn't have those before. But something happened in the middle of the school year that changed everything. That something involved the math substitute teacher handing back a math test in ascending order of scores. What sucked is that everyone knew that the first few people to be called had especially bad scores (I'm talking about Ds and Fs) since the test was super hard. I was one of the first few students to be called. I hated the substitute teacher for shaming me in front of my classmates. I could imagine the students sitting in the front row seeing my test score and snickering to themselves. A hot flush rose in my cheeks, and I vowed to never get such a low math grade again.

For the next math test, I actually studied with some tutoring from my brother, and my scores skyrocketed. Flash forward to 7th grade when I was taking Algebra. One time, when my teacher was handing out the tests, she announced to the class that I was the only one among all three of her classes to get a full score. I felt like I just ate a whole bag of swedish fish. My head was swimming in the clouds. I was high on success for the rest of the day. After all, I was the only one who got every single question right on the test! It was a novel concept to me, and I needed to experience it again. So I studied harder and soon enough started building up a streak of perfect math scores. For all future math classes (minus Geometry), I strived for perfection. I was able to build up a pretty solid streak of 100% in AP Calc BC and never failed to get a full score on a Linearity 1 & 2 quiz.

Math was the driving force behind my transformation from an elementary-school snack monster to a perfectionist who can't handle getting an A-. With math, it's possible to attain perfection because there is only one right answer. Of course, there could be a bunch of different ways to solve a problem, but only the final outcome matters when receiving a grade. Also, striving for perfection is necessary to fully grasp more complex math concepts, but what I didn't predict was that I would project my fear of making mistakes to all my other classes. By the time I realized just how much of a perfectionist I became, it was already much too integrated into my identity. Being a perfectionist is exhausting. It's like being trapped in Little Genius for the entire day without any snacks. I'm constantly finding problems with my work and a million ways that I can improve it. I need to timebox every task I work on to prevent dangerous rabbit holes from popping up.

Now, if I got a bee poster assignment, I would not only whip out the clipart images to trace over but also glue on dried flowers and little hairs for the bee legs. After that, I would convert my list of bee facts into a poem to transcribe in cursive on bee-themed handouts that people can pick up when they are in front of my poster. I miss that little girl version of me who could just delegate the bee poster to someone else and be happy with whatever it looked like. Little me didn't care at all about those assignments. She did what mattered to her. I want that too. I want to not care so much anymore. I want to be able to put aside a convoluted textbook or unimportant presentation and spend my time doing research and baking. Where is that little girl hiding in me?

### Chapter 3: Technically, this should be called “The Half Asian Fail”

My relationship with the Asian Fail is kinda complicated because I’m technically half Asian. My mom, originating from China, met my dad, who came from Switzerland, during graduate school. Officially, I’m half Chinese, a quarter German, and a quarter Swiss. At Lynbrook High School, I was never “Asian enough” compared to my classmates. My pale skin, medium brown hair, and deep-set eyes placed me in the white kid group, even though I knew more Mandarin than most of my Chinese friends and was obsessed with Chinese pop culture.

With my foreign appearance, I was never officially part of the Asian STEM crowd. I had to form my own friend group with an outstanding representation of halfies (half Asian and half something else). While other lunch groups talked about college admission essays and helped each other with math homework, we discussed various art techniques and analyzed fight sequences from the RWBY animation. For the first two years of high school, I could afford to goof off during lunch, but starting junior year, I started to feel like I was wasting my time. I was taking 4 AP classes and had to start practicing for the SATs. I saw my more academic-focused classmates working every moment of the day on their homework and was feeling left out, so I started going to the library during brunch and lunch to squeeze in as much homework and study time as possible.

At the library, I met a whole new gang of students. Students who were like me in that they put too much on their plates and were scared of getting an Asian Fail. Instead of eating lunch, we would sit at one of those round tables at the back of the library and work on AP Calc homework and study for AP Chemistry exams. However, there was always a divide between me and those like-minded students. They were all willing to study with me in the library and ask me science and math questions, but when they finally had an opportunity to hang out and have fun, they would sprint away to their Asian friend groups, and I would still be at the library working on some other assignment or chatting with the librarians.

To them, I was a smart white kid, but I wasn’t actually part of their group. There was no way I could understand their stress and their parents’ high expectations. Eric’s older brother got into Princeton, and now he was expected to accomplish the same miracle. Irene was submitting over ten pieces to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards in an

attempt to pump out even more achievements for her Stanford application. Joshua's parents signed him up for a million intense SAT prep boot camps, and he had to stay up until 4 am every day to finish his AP homework and SAT workbooks. On the other hand, my parents didn't seem to care. My only responsibilities were to finish my school assignments, lead three clubs, compete in the science fair, play two varsity-level sports, practice for the SATs, and teach creative writing and science to kids at the Calabazas library. I was able to go to sleep at 10 pm every night, so clearly my life was pretty chill.

Also, I had way less competition compared to my Asian classmates. While they had to compete against thousands of amazing Asian students to get into UCLA or UC Berkeley, I could pick and choose which race I wanted to be. One of my college counselors recommended that I identify as Caucasian for UC schools and Asian for East Coast schools to raise my chances. I thought that was a good thing. I could flip flop between two races, constantly picking the side that was most convenient for me. I wanted to feel the flexibility of being a halfie, but really, I was trapped in between, not ever belonging on either side. I identified with the Asian work mentality, but I couldn't fully call it my own because I was constantly reminded of my difference.

I remember one of my classmates, David, jokingly asked me why I was so smart for a white person after I helped him understand a more complicated AP Stat concept. At the time, I laughed it off and told him that it was because I'm part Chinese. David's question didn't bother me at all because I was so used to everyone seeing me as the outlier Caucasian girl with flawless grades. The stereotype that Asians were good at studying and everyone else sucked was so embedded into my school's culture that I truly believed that my half-Chinese background was the reason why I did so well in school. For a bunch of people with 4.0 GPAs, we were pretty stupid on some things.

The most troubling thing about being part white in a school with mostly Asians is that whenever I received an award I wasn't sure whether I got the award for my merit or for my race. In 10th grade, I started receiving a bunch of academic awards: athlete scholar, the Princeton book award, and five class-specific best student awards. I constantly received invitations to attend award ceremonies that my brother didn't even know existed back when he was at Lynbrook. I was being showered with awards even though I didn't work as hard as many of my classmates. I assumed that I was being recognized so much because I stood out as a non-Asian person with good grades.

In 12th grade, I received a note from the principal's office asking me to meet with the principal at the beginning of lunch. I had no idea why I was receiving the note and assumed that I was in trouble. Did they somehow realize that I ditched every school rally, so I could wait in front of the dining hall for cookies when the bell rang? I nervously entered the principal's office and found another student sitting at the table. Maybe I accidentally cut in front of him in the lunch line? The principal had us sit side-by-side in front of her and proudly announced that we were selected as the class of 2017 poster students. Posters about our achievements would be displayed in the district office for an entire year, and the school would organize several award ceremonies to honor us. For a school with like 80% Asians, both of the Lynbrook 2017 poster students were white, which wasn't fishy at all. I suspected that I only got the award because I didn't look Asian. It felt like a fake and superficial badge of honor. I didn't even show up to the second award ceremony.

I like being recognized for my hard work, but I can't stand receiving something that I didn't earn from scratch. The perfectionist within me doesn't care about race. It wants to produce top-notch work that stands out. It doesn't want to fail, regardless of whether it's called an "Asian" fail or not. Race has nothing to do with fearing imperfection. What matters is that I grew up in an achievement-driven environment and tried to stay afloat by becoming a perfectionist. Asian Fail is what my high school school used to describe anything less than perfect, but it exists in other places too. Even at Olin, which is much more diverse than my hometown, there are people who can't easily shake off their terror of not getting a 4.0 GPA. I'm definitely one of those people.

I'm trying to change (that's partly why I'm writing this in the first place), but it's not going to happen overnight. I can't help going all out on every assignment or poster, even if it keeps me awake at night and gives me stomach aches.

In a way, I'm glad that I got that A-. It put me down from the clouds and onto the ground where I can properly reflect and learn from this experience. I guess that's the whole point of education, figuring out who you are and then working hard to go beyond your own definition. I'll try applying this perspective more often. (Disclaimer: just to clarify, I'm not asking to get A-'s or lower grades starting now just for the sake of personal development. I still plan to work hard and try my best. The thing I can't stand

the most is getting a grade without understanding why, but that's another topic for another time.)

# Lemon Blueberry Cornmeal Cake



*During the next few hours, the thought that I actually learned a lot in that class didn't cross my mind once. I was shocked and extremely pissed. My perfect streak was broken! I epically failed, and my student status will now plummet down the ranks.*

This recipe is matched with Chapter 1 of "The Asian Fail" ([link to piece](#)), which describes my reaction to getting my first Asian Fail. That day I was feeling pretty down, so I wanted to pick a dessert that would have cheered me up. The lemon blueberry cornmeal cake is the perfect baked good for that. It's easy to make, healthy, tasty, and just perfect for a blue day.

I came up with this recipe after experimenting with a bunch of different gluten free cornmeal cakes. The recipe contains all my favorite flavors: lemon, blueberry, coconut, and almond. The lemon and blueberry tastes contrast sharply with the soft and velvety coconut and almond flavors, producing a well-rounded dessert that brings me so much joy. Of course, not everyone loves the same flavors as I do, but no worries, the toppings on the cake are super customizable!

*Recipe makes one 7-inch cake, and it's gluten free!*

## Ingredients (left column)

### Equipment

- 7 inch springform pan (greased with oil or butter)
- Two mixing bowls (one medium, one small)
- Whisk
- Rubber spatula
- Scale and/or measuring cups (I like to use a scale for dry ingredients and measuring cups for liquids)

## Cake

- 2 large egg whites at room temperature<sup>1</sup>
- 1 large egg at room temperature
- 1/2 cup (123 grams) lemon yogurt<sup>2</sup>
- 1/3 cup (113 grams) honey
- 1/4 cup (60 grams) vegetable oil
- 1 tsp lemon zest
- 1/4 tsp almond extract
- 3/4 cup gluten-free flour<sup>3</sup>
- 1/2 cup (78 grams) yellow cornmeal
- 1 tsp (4.8 grams) baking powder
- 1/4 tsp salt

## Topping

- 1 cup washed blueberries
- Handful of slivered almonds
- Handful of coconut flakes
- Other things that you want to scatter on top of the cake (e.g. chopped chocolate, other nuts, dried fruit, etc.)

## Instructions (right column)

1. **Preheat:** preheat oven to 350°F
2. **Mix the wet ingredients:** in a medium to large mixing bowl, combine the egg whites, egg, yogurt, honey, oil, lemon zest, and almond extract. Whisk together until evenly combined
3. **Mix the dry ingredients:** in a smaller mixing bowl, combine the flour, cornmeal, baking powder, and salt. Stir until ingredients are well distributed
4. **Add dry to wet:** pour the dry ingredients into the mixing bowl containing the wet ingredients and fold together with a rubber spatula until all traces of flour disappear. The batter should be pretty runny and contain minimal clumps
5. **Final touches before baking:** pour the batter into the greased springform pan. For the topping, sprinkle one layer of blueberries<sup>4</sup>, trying not to clump everything on top of each other. Sprinkle slivered almonds, coconut flakes, and other fun ingredients on top of the blueberries to your heart's content
6. **Bake:** bake the cake at 350°F for 35-45 minutes. The time range is pretty wide depending on how much topping you added. Check on it after 30-35 minutes and then keep checking every 5 minutes<sup>5</sup>. Once the almonds and coconut flakes start to brown, the sides of the cake appear medium to dark brown, and the cake has a slight spring when you lightly push on it, the cake should be ready!
7. **Cool:** After you take out the cake, cool the cake to room temperature before opening up the springform pan and transferring the base of the pan onto a serving plate<sup>6</sup>.

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## Tips and Tricks

1. It's easier to separate egg whites and egg yolks when the eggs are cold, so I would recommend getting the egg whites first and then letting it sit out to get to room temperature
2. You can make your own lemon yogurt with lemon zest and juice. I love lemons, so I usually add around 1/4 cup of lemon juice and 2 tsp of lemon zest to the yogurt. Measurements don't really matter for this step. Just add the juice and zest from one lemon
3. I like to add 1/2 cup (56 grams) of almond flour and 1/4 cup (37 grams) of all-purpose gluten free flour (I use Bob's Red Mill 1 to 1 Baking Flour). You could even use regular all-purpose flour if you can eat gluten
4. Don't worry about using up all the blueberries, just get a one spread out layer with some small gaps
5. The toothpick test may not work since the blueberries are pretty juicy
6. You can also try to remove the cake from the base, but be super careful since you don't want to destroy the toppings if you flip the cake upside down. The colder the cake is, the easier it would be to move it. You can also try to use a large metal spatula to move the bottom of the cake from the base to a serving plate. Transferring cakes is definitely an art form that I'm always working on!

# Pineapple Buns



*Whenever I didn't succeed in convincing my dad not to send me to Little Genius, I forced him to buy me bubble tea and pineapple buns from the food court next to the after-school program. My mom was a bit harder to convince. She rarely came to pick me up early from Little Genius even if I called her on the phone and told her that I wanted to go home. Since it was worth the risk, I always asked if we could buy more snacks from the food court before leaving. Sometimes, she said yes, and I got treats before and after experiencing hell. Those Little Genius days weren't too bad.*

This recipe is matched with Chapter 2 of "The Asian Fail" ([link to piece](#)), which describes what sort of student I was in elementary school and how I transformed into the perfectionist that I am today. Pineapple buns are one of the sweets that I reference in that chapter. I forced my dad to buy them for me whenever he drove me to Little Genius, an after-school program that I really detested as a kid. I am including a recipe of pineapple buns to represent that little girl within me who doesn't like to study and just wants to eat sweets.

Pineapple buns are classic Asian pastries. The bun is soft and slightly sweet, similar to a bread roll. A crispy and buttery sugar crust lies on the top of the bun with cracks on the surface, which gives the pastry a pineapple pattern. When I was young, I used to think that pineapple buns actually contained pineapple flavoring, but sadly they don't. I must have imagined the buns to have a subtle pineapple taste that only my delicate taste buds could detect. It wasn't until I started researching pineapple bun recipes a month ago that I realized the missing pineapple. The past me would have been quite disappointed!

Pineapple buns are actually pretty complicated to make from scratch, which is kinda ironic since that's the sweet that represents my carefree, homework avoider, self. They are easy to eat, but difficult to make, which fits with the times I delegated my work to other people when I was in elementary school. I only made pineapple buns once, so I don't think I'm qualified to write my own recipe. I followed [Healthy Nibbles' recipe](#), which I highly recommend. The instructions are quite detailed, and the pineapple buns turned out really well. Another recipe I found is from

[Omnivore's Cookbook](#). Instead of paraphrasing their recipes, I decided to just include a tips and tricks section.

## Tips and Tricks

- Tangzhong is a bread-making technique that produces soft yeast breads. It involves briefly heating up a bit of flour and liquid, constantly mixing until a thick slurry is formed, and then combining it with the other bread ingredients. Tangzhong works by pre-gelatinizing the starches in the flour, so they could absorb and hold on to more water. This results in a less sticky dough, a higher rise, and a softer texture. It's super important for Asian buns, so definitely pay attention to those steps!
- If you don't have one of those fancy stand mixers, you can knead the dough by hand. Kneading allows the gluten protein molecules to coagulate and form the bread's underlying structure. If the recipe says to mix for 10 minutes, then knead for the same amount of time. [Here](#) is a good source that explains how to knead dough by hand. The key things to remember are to add the flour in stages and to implement the window pane test
- Temperature matters when it comes to rising bread dough. The optimal temperature to grow yeast is between 75-78°F, which might not correspond to the temperature in your kitchen, especially when it's winter or the AC is on. There are several ways you can store dough while it rises to hit that temperature sweet spot. You could buy an electric dough proofer or a dough-rising bucket. If you don't want to buy anything fancy, you can put it in a container with a snap-on lid. Don't drape a towel over the dough since it will allow moisture to escape, which may negatively impact the rise. There are a few other options that are described [here](#)
- One of the things I struggle with the most is deciding when the dough has risen enough. There is supposedly a simple test that can help you tell whether you underproofed or overproofed your dough. Basically, you give the dough a good poke and see how it reacts. If the dough immediately springs back, then it is underproofed and needs some more time to rise. (Yeast is still producing lots of air bubbles, so it isn't at the sleepy rate that is ideal for baking.) If the dough springs back slowly, and your poke leaves a small indentation, then the dough has risen enough. If the dough doesn't spring back at all, then it's overproofed, and you have to perform so magic to undo that (google has the answers as usual)
- Making the pineapple bun topping is pretty straightforward. It's basically a super buttery and high-sugar shortbread cookie dough
- Before shaping the buns, the bread dough needs to be "punched down" to prevent it from overproofing during the second rise. You don't need to actually punch it. Just gently press on the dough to deflate it. After pressing down on it, it's recommended to also fold the dough. Folding the dough helps remove air bubbles but also allows the bread to rise higher and create a looser crumb once it's baked. [This source](#) explains two different folding methods

- When shaping the buns, pinch the seam at the bottom to form a tight outer skin, which would result in a higher rise and better shape
- The second rise requires a similar environment as the first. You can also use the same method to test whether it has risen enough
- I highly recommend rolling out the pineapple bun topping between two plastic sheets. It makes it so much easier to transfer onto the buns. Try to aim for a thin layer, so around 1/4" (5 mm) thick
- Definitely eat the buns warm. They taste heavenly after a few minutes from the oven!
- **Disclaimer:** I'm not a bread expert. In fact, I might be gluten sensitive, so I don't eat much bread in general, which is so sad because I love bread. Even so, I enjoy reading about how to bake bread, so hopefully the sources I put here will be helpful for you!

# Marble Bundt Cake



*One of my college counselors recommended that I identify as Caucasian for UC schools and Asian for East Coast schools to raise my chances. I thought that was a good thing. I could flip flop between two races, constantly picking the side that was most convenient for me. I wanted to feel the flexibility of being a halfie, but really, I was trapped in between, not ever belonging on either side.*

This recipe is matched with Chapter 3 of “The Asian Fail” ([link to piece](#)), which describes how my multiracial background complicates my relationship with the Asian Fail. The marble bundt cake has two components, vanilla and chocolate, that are intertwined, representing my halfie status. Also, the cake is super filling and dense, so I could eat it for breakfast and be able to skip lunch, which connects with the times in high school when I skipped lunch to study in the library.

I came up with this recipe after my dad told me he wanted a marble cake for his birthday. I have been making this recipe quite often because it’s a family favorite. The swirl patterns are fun to look at and make every slice appear unique. The cake tastes twice as amazing with a chocolate ganache layer, so I highly recommend not skipping that part.

*Recipe makes one 10-inch bundt, and it’s gluten free!*

## Ingredients (left column)

### Equipment

- 10-inch greased bundt cake pan (typically the standard size)
- Two mixing bowls (one large, one medium)
- Scale and/or measuring cups<sup>1</sup>
- Electric mixer
- Rubber spatula
- Cooling rack

## Cake Base

- 1 cup (227 grams) butter at room temperature<sup>2</sup>
- 1.5 cups (350 grams) granulated sugar
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract
- 4 large eggs at room temperature
- 1 cup (225 grams) buttermilk<sup>3</sup>
- 3 cups cake flour<sup>4</sup>
- 2 tsps (9.6 grams) baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt

## Cake Flavoring

- 2/3 cup (65 grams) dutch-processed cocoa powder
- 1/2 cup (123 grams) milk
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

## Chocolate Ganache

- 1 cup (160 grams) dark chocolate chips
- 2/3 cup (160 grams) heavy cream

## Instructions (right column)

1. **Preheat:** preheat oven to 350°F
2. **Mix the dry ingredients:** in a medium mixing bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and salt. Stir until ingredients are well distributed
3. **Cream butter:** in the large mixing bowl, cream the butter on medium speed until smooth. Usually this takes around 5 minutes
4. **Add the sugar:** add granulated sugar and cream on medium speed until mixture is pale yellow, light, and fluffy. Takes around another 5 minutes. Use a rubber spatula to scrape the sides of the bowl one or twice while mixing
5. **Add in remaining wet ingredients:** add in the eggs one at a time, mixing on medium-low speed until incorporated. Add in 1 tbsp vanilla extract and the buttermilk. Mix until evenly combined
6. **Add dry to wet:** pour the dry ingredients into the mixing bowl containing the wet ingredients and fold together with a rubber spatula until all traces of flour disappear<sup>5</sup>. The batter should be thick and contain minimal clumps
7. **Separate batter and flavor:** pour half of the batter into the medium mixing bowl<sup>6</sup> and mix in the cocoa powder and milk to form the chocolate batter. In the large mixing bowl containing the remaining half, add 1 tsp of vanilla extract<sup>7</sup> to enhance the vanilla flavor

8. **Final touches before baking:** use two large serving spoons or 1/4 cups to scoop the chocolate and vanilla batters into the greased pan, alternating to create a marbled pattern<sup>8</sup>
  9. **Bake:** bake the bread at 350°F between 50 and 70 minutes<sup>9</sup>. It's done when a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean, and the cake has a slight spring when lightly pressed
  10. **Make the chocolate ganache:** heat up the heavy cream in the microwave in 30 second intervals until the heavy cream is warm but hasn't boiled. Add in the chocolate chips and fold them in with a rubber spatula. Keep folding until the chocolate has melted, and a thick and smooth liquid chocolate texture has formed<sup>10</sup>
  11. **Cool:** after you take out the cake, cool until slightly warm before flipping the cake onto a cooling rack lined with parchment/wax paper. Let the cake cool to room temperature before drizzling the top of the cake with chocolate ganache<sup>11</sup>. Transfer the cake to a serving plate and bon appétit! Store the cake in the fridge if you don't want the chocolate ganache to melt. The cake would become a lot more dense, which actually goes pretty well with the ganache and flavors
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## Tips and Tricks

1. I like to use a scale for dry ingredients and measuring cups for liquids
2. It's important for the butter to be at room temperature before creaming it. You can tell that butter is at room temperature if it's malleable to the touch. Microwaving to soften the butter isn't the same since it won't trap enough air
3. In case you don't have buttermilk at home, there are several possible substitutes. You can make your own buttermilk by adding white vinegar or lemon juice to milk. For 1 cup of buttermilk, pour out just under 1 cup worth of milk, then add 1 tbsp of white vinegar or lemon juice. After that, add milk up to the 1 cup mark. Let the mixture stand for 5-10 minutes until the milk curdles. Other buttermilk substitutes include 1 cup of kefir or 3/4 cup plain yogurt/sour cream with 1/4 cup water
4. You can use regular cake flour, but I like to make this recipe gluten free. To do that I add 333 grams of all-purpose gluten free flour, 56 grams of almond flour, and 37 grams of cornstarch. To make the cake less dense you can add more almond flour and less all-purpose gluten free flour
5. Mix until just combined. You don't want to overmix, especially if you are using regular flour since the gluten will start coagulating, which would make the cake less soft
6. You can just re-use the mixing bowl with the dry ingredients after wiping it
7. I also like to add a few tsps of rose water or orange liquor (e.g. cointreau or grand marnier) to the batters to give them a slight fruity scent
8. There are several ways to create the marble pattern. One is to drop a scoop of batter into the pan and then top it with a scoop of the other batter. While alternating batters, you

would continuously drop scoops on top of each other. The batter would start to flow around the center and fill up the entire bundt pan. Throughout the process, don't stir the batter. You can level it out by gently tapping the pan a few times. This method is a bit tricky to implement, so I usually use another method. A second method is to dot large spoonfuls of one batter into the bottom of the pan and then drop large spoonfuls of the other batter over the first layer, checkboarding the two layers a bit. Continue the layering process until all the batter is depleted and then use a skewer or knife to marble the batters together in figure-8 motions

9. The bake time has been consistently an hour for me
10. You can also make the chocolate ganache over the stove. Just heat up the heavy cream in a small saucepan until it is simmering and then add the chocolate chips. On low heat, keep stirring until the chocolate is melted and you get that thick chocolate ganache viscosity. If you want a thicker chocolate ganache, then half the amount of heavy cream
11. The easiest way to drizzle chocolate ganache over the cake is to slowly pour the ganache around the top of the cake. If the ganache is too thick, you can add some orange liquor or rose water to thin it out. You want to pour closer to the outside edge of the cake, so the ganache will drip down the sides instead of inside the hole

# Shortbread Cookies

Tis the season, and you decide to go back to your hometown to celebrate the Holidays. You have a red-eye flight tonight and a few hours to spare before you need to call an Uber to the airport. You are excited to see your parents, siblings, and childhood friends again at the huge annual Christmas party that your family organizes, but there is a lump of anxiety eating away at the bottom of your stomach. You haven't been home in three years. Your dad warned you about that before you left for grad school. He said that you would rarely see him again, only coming home for short visits that would become increasingly sporadic as you grew older. At the time, you swore that you would visit every few months and always stay by mommy's and daddy's side.

Dad was right, as usual. You drifted away from your family, floating up into a whole new world of adulting. Before you lose yourself in these new heights, you want to visit the ground at least one more time. So you're going back home with an anchor dangling down, determined to reform a connection with your family.

It's easy to be up in the sky by yourself, not having to care about others. Your only obligation is to be in the lab every day for eight hours. At work, there is always another email to write or a new issue to debug. You tackle one to-do after the other until your desk is surrounded by a dark silence. You sit in an empty subway and trek through the darkness before arriving back at your apartment. It's already close to 9 pm, so you quickly heat up some leftover mushroom pizza from yesterday. Repeating this day in and day out is easy, but it's boring, like drifting through the same clouds over and over again. At this point, you tried all of Trader Joe's frozen dinner options a million times.

You miss those times when you spent the entire day with your brother testing out a "simple" Julia Child French recipe. Beef bourguignon, a rustic farmer's dish that required every pot and pan in the kitchen. Pêches cardinal, a light summer dessert of poached peaches covered in raspberry puree, which wrecked the Vitamix blender. The two of you would argue about different recipe interpretations, while mom and dad constantly poked their noses into the kitchen, taking pictures and asking for samples. You don't know if you can get that again when you come home. Your brother just became a father, which puts him on a whole nother level in the family hierarchy. Even so, the closeness and warmth of being home is more than enough to cure your loneliness.

However, you can't go back home empty-handed. Mom taught you to always prepare a gift when you are a guest, and until you arrive back home, you feel like a guest, an outsider. It's taboo to

grab something random sitting in your apartment, and your savings are dangerously close to the “will I be able to afford next month’s rent?” threshold. Souvenirs at the airport are so ridiculously overpriced. You chastise yourself for not thinking about this sooner. Maybe you can make something within the next five hours? Parents always like getting handmade gifts from their children even if they are in their late 20s. The living room back home is covered in paintings of flowers and wine bottles, even though your art teacher technically did most of them. Dad constantly shows you the Father’s Day card you drew him when you were five with a sloppily written “I love you” next to a stick figure. The typical “shoot I forgot that I have to make a card” kind of gift. Unfortunately, that tactic no longer flies. You forfeited your position as the family’s cutie pie three years ago. You have to make something that a grown-up lady would. You step into your kitchen and start rummaging through the cabinets.

You used to bake like crazy, claiming it was your greatest passion. Watching *The Great British Bake Off*, flipping through baking science textbooks, scrolling through a million ASMR baking videos on YouTube, and scavenging the internet for recipes that you could mash together. You did all of these while dreaming that one day you could make something that looked and tasted just as amazing. Unfortunately, you weren’t super talented. You rarely got a recipe right on the first try. Most of the time, you screwed up a little thing and ended up with a subpar dessert. Accidentally forgetting to peel the apples before making apple butter and ending up with an apple sauce pie instead of a smooth and thick berry apple butter pie. You totally freaked out when the peels refused to dissolve with the pulp, and dad had to fix the blender so you could patch up your mistake. Over proofing your matcha sesame babka, resulting in a nearly burnt bake. Mom claimed that she loved the hard and slightly bitter crust because it reminded her of a treat from her childhood. Doing who knows what wrong with a Japanese cheesecake and having to cover up a large crack on the surface with blueberries. Your parents thought your blueberry decoration was intentional and wanted to take a bunch of photos before cutting the cake. Each mistake weighed down on you, but your parents were always there to encourage you to keep trying. You worked hard, got better, even worked at a cafe for a summer. But baking takes time, especially if you want to do it well, so once grad school started and you lost your cheerleaders, you put away your apron and redirected your determination to your research.

It’s been months since you baked something. Your pantry is quite diminished, but the essential ingredients are still there: all-purpose flour, sugar, baking powder, butter, and eggs. What should you make? Muffins? You don’t have a muffin tin. A sponge cake? How are you going to fit that in your backpack? Cookies? Yes, shortbread cookies are an option! Before your brother left for college, he would bake your grandmother’s shortbread cookies every Christmas. Sometimes, you would help him sift the flour, dig through the cookie cutter box, and coat the tops of the cookies with egg wash before baking them. Your brother constantly forgot to write down the recipe, so

every year, the cookies tasted a bit different. Some years were too dry, others tasted like mini cakes. Baking shortbread cookies seemed like the most complicated recipe in the world, especially the part where you roll out the dough into a uniformly thin sheet. Eventually, he stopped baking cookies, and the family tradition went on hiatus.

When you were back home for Christmas near the end of college, you stumbled upon your grandmother's original recipe written in German. Your dad helped you translate the instructions, and you adapted your grandmother's shortbread recipe to your own tastes, cutting down as much sugar as possible without impacting the chemistry. You experimented with different baking conditions and made the recipe your own. After two tries, you were able to reproduce the best versions of your brother's cookies. Your parents love those cookies, so you decide to go for it. You open your fridge to fish out the butter and eggs. It's important to have cold ingredients at room temperature, so they would more easily bond together, creating a seamless and evenly textured batter. Additionally, butter and eggs trap more air at room temperature, which would result in a more tender cookie. You pull out a few sticks of unsalted butter and a couple of eggs, leaving them to warm up on the counter while you dig out your little baking notebook.

The softcover notebook is smaller than the palm of your hand. The pages are stained and wrinkled from various ingredients that escaped from measuring spoons or bowls. You flip to the page with your shortbread cookie recipe and start measuring out the ingredients using a \$10 kitchen scale from Amazon. The measuring ingredients game is still as vexing as always. You weigh 250 grams of butter and 180 grams of sugar in two separate bowls. In a slightly larger mixing bowl, you measure out the dry ingredients, 500 grams of all-purpose flour and 1 tsp of baking powder. The baking powder is tricky since it's even more powdery than flour. You can't just stick a teaspoon into the container and expect to scoop out exactly 1 tsp. The natural alternative would be to weigh baking powder, but 1 tsp is 4.8 grams, and your scale doesn't have that many significant digits. So you slowly add baking powder into the mixing bowl and watch the scale hit 4 grams. You add a tiny bit more and then the weight shoots to 6 grams. Urgh! The baking powder is already camouflaged among the flour. You try to scrape off the topmost layer, but the scale stubbornly stays at 6 grams. Ahh! Whatever! You're out of practice and don't have all day. You whisk together the flour and baking powder, finalizing the measurements. Your mom would have stuck the teaspoon right in the container and saved all that trouble, but accuracy is needed to create the perfect cookies.

The last ingredients to prepare are lemon zest and juice. You grew up with a huge lemon tree in the backyard that provided an endless supply of large yellow lemons year round, which meant that all your recipes contain some form of lemon. In Boston, lemons are expensive, but old

habits die hard, and you pay the extra few dollars to always have 1-2 lemons in your fridge. You take out your last lemon. The skin is smooth and light yellow, unlike the rough and darker skin of lemons back home. You cut the lemon in half and squeeze each half over a small bowl, carefully removing the seeds. Before throwing away the hollowed-out shells, you harvest the yellow skin with a microplane grater, tightly gripping one side of the lemon as you slide it back and forth.

With all the ingredients, you follow the recipe step by step, making sure the butter is malleable to the touch before creaming it with the sugar, 2 eggs, lemon, a sprinkle of sea salt, and a dash of vanilla powder. From there, you slowly sift in the flour and baking powder. After dusting the batter with a thick layer of white snow, you force the hand mixer through the thickening mixture at a crawling pace. Sift and then mix. Eventually, the batter becomes a clay-like dough, and you abandon the mixer in favor of your hands, gently kneading until the dry powder disappears without a trace.

To firm up the butter and create shortbread's crumbly texture, you chill the dough in the fridge. After two hours, you take out the hardened dough and roll it out until it is 1 cm thick. Having made thousands of pie crusts at La Terra cafe, rolling dough into a flat plain is almost second nature. You take a small metal ruler and measure the height of the edges, making sure they are very close to 1 cm. All your fancy Christmas cookie cutters are at home, but you have a practical 12-piece round cookie cutter set, which you use to cut a diverse range of circular shapes. You cover two parchment-lined baking sheets with circles and coat the tops with whisked egg yolk before sliding the trays into an oven preheated to 350° F. You close the heavy oven door with a thud and wait for the cookies to finish in around 15 minutes.

After freezing the leftover dough and washing the bowls, you hover around the oven. You can't focus your attention on another task, just like when you were a little kid and sat on a stool in the front of the oven, watching the timer countdown. You keep wondering if the cookies will turn out okay and whether you accidentally messed up. Maybe the 1.2 grams of extra baking powder will make the cookies expand too much? Could there be egg shells hiding in the dough? You turn on the oven light and peek through the blurry glass window. You can barely make out clumps of dough on the baking sheet. What's happening in the oven is completely out of your command. The measuring, mixing, chilling, and cutting that you spent hours on were just preliminary stages to prepare for these 15 minutes in the oven. You did all the hard work setting the stage, but it all comes down to the bake.

Butter melts and releases trapped air and water, which expands air pockets formed during the mixing process. This gas expansion needs to be carefully timed with protein coagulation to

create a cookie with both structure and lightness. Egg and flour proteins trap water and form a continuous network that surrounds the expanding air pockets, creating a home that protects the gases from the outside world as they mature. A cozy home with a large lemon tree, cornflower blue walls, and a narrow kitchen filled with enticing flavors. A home with a thousand books, a well-stocked pantry, and a million baking supplies. But children can't stay inside forever. They have to leave the house to go to college and then find their own air pockets to protect.

Once the gases grow up, the air pockets are no longer able to contain them, and the support structure ruptures, forming a porous sponge-like texture where gases freely pass in and out. When the dough becomes a sponge, its shape is finalized, and the excited gases surge out of their nests and go on their own adventures outside of the cookie world. The structure builders are left behind in a home covered in doors that are always open for their children. Some gases will calm down and eventually remember to visit their homes. Others will forever remain outside the cookies, even escaping the oven into a whole new universe. With all the empty nests, the cookies lose a lot of moisture and weight. The lack of water forms a dry and hard crust on the surface, a network of scars on the proteins that are left behind. The crust eventually browns from sugar caramelization and maillard browning, forming a sugary lemon scent that spreads throughout the apartment. The cookies are almost ready.

The timer on the oven starts blaring, and you quickly shove on bright-red oven mitts and crack open the oven door. The orderly rows of cookies have a bright orange shine on the surface and a light brown complexion on the bottom. They look perfect. You extract the trays and place them on a towel to cool for a few minutes. The cookies will continue to bake for a while longer. You call an Uber and then rummage through your closet to find the new pack of tupperware you bought from Target but never opened.

To test the quality of your cookies, you eat one of the smallest cookies. The cookie is still warm and part of it melts on your tongue. The sweetness from the sugar and sourness from the lemon dissolves to reach your taste buds. The more complex aromas of vanilla, citrus, and caramelized sugar drift to your olfactory cells. The texture perfectly complements the flavors, a crumbly but soft base with a hint of denseness from a thin layer of egg wash. Flawless, as far as you could tell. You pack the rest of the cookies in the container. You can't wait for your parents and brother to taste them. With some shortbread cookies, there's no way they wouldn't invite you home with open arms.

# Mailänderli Cookies



*The cookie is still warm and part of it melts on your tongue. The sweetness from the sugar and sourness from the lemon dissolves to reach your taste buds. The more complex aromas of vanilla, citrus, and caramelized sugar drift to your olfactory cells. The texture perfectly complements the flavors, a crumbly but soft base with a hint of denseness from a thin layer of egg wash. Flawless, as far as you could tell.*

This recipe is matched with “Shortbread Cookies” ([link to piece](#)). It’s the recipe that I follow throughout the story. Mailänderli is the German word for butter biscuits. My grandmother gave this recipe to my brother and eventually to me. I bake Mailänderli cookies for Christmas and Easter since they make amazing gifts!

*Recipe makes around 40 cookies*

## Ingredients (left column)

### Equipment

- Two mixing bowls (one large, one medium)
- Scale and/or measuring cups<sup>1</sup>
- Electric mixer
- Rubber spatula
- Sifter
- Rolling pin
- Cookie cutters
- Ruler to measure cookie height
- Baking trays and parchment paper
- Pastry brush
- Cooling rack

## Cookie Dough

- 17 1/2 tbsps (250 grams) butter at room temperature<sup>2</sup>
- 3/4 cup (180 grams) granulated sugar
- 2 eggs at room temperature
- 1/2 tsp vanilla extract/vanilla powder
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1 tbsp lemon zest
- 3 tbsps lemon juice<sup>3</sup>
- 4 cups (500 grams) all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp (4.8 grams) baking powder

## Egg Wash

- 1 egg yolk
- 1 tbsp heavy cream (optional)<sup>4</sup>

## Instructions (right column)

1. **Preheat:** preheat oven to 350°F
2. **Mix the dry ingredients:** in the medium mixing bowl, combine the flour and baking powder. Stir until ingredients are well distributed
3. **Cream butter:** in the large mixing bowl, cream the butter on medium speed until smooth. Usually this takes around 5 minutes
4. **Add the sugar:** add granulated sugar and cream on medium speed until mixture is pale yellow, light, and fluffy. Takes around another 5 minutes. Use a rubber spatula to scrape the sides of the bowl one or twice while mixing
5. **Add in remaining wet ingredients:** add in the eggs one at a time, mixing on medium-low speed until incorporated. Add in the vanilla extract/powder, salt, lemon zest, and lemon juice. Mix until evenly combined
6. **Add dry to wet:** in several batches, sift the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients. For each batch, mix the dough together until most of the flour disappears<sup>5</sup>. After adding in the last batch, knead/mix the dough until all traces of flour disappear. The dough should feel like soft clay
7. **Refrigerate dough:** chill the dough in the fridge for at least 2 hours and up to 3 days
8. **Cut out cookies:** roll the dough to 1 cm thick<sup>6</sup>. Use cookie cutters to cut out shapes. Transfer the cookies to baking trays lined with parchment paper
9. **Final touches before baking:** coat the tops of each cookie with egg wash
10. **Bake:** bake cookies at 350°F for 15 minutes. When cookies are slightly brown on the bottom, then they are ready
11. **Cool:** cool cookies on baking trays for 10-20 minutes before transferring them to a cooling rack. At this point, you can start eating them! :)

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## Tips and Tricks

1. I like to use a scale for dry ingredients and measuring cups for liquids
2. It's important for the butter to be at room temperature before creaming it. You can tell that butter is at room temperature if it's malleable to the touch. Microwaving to soften the butter isn't the same since it won't trap enough air
3. The amount of lemon you add is up to you. If you want a stronger lemony scent, then add more. You can also just add the zest and juice from one lemon to keep things easier
4. If you want the cookies to have an orange top, then skip the heavy cream. If you want a more pale, golden color, then add the heavy cream
5. Eventually, the dough might become too thick to mix with the electric mixer, so knead the dough with your hands
6. The thickness is also adaptable. If you want crispier cookies, make them thinner. If you want them to be more moist and cakey, then make them thicker. I would recommend 1-1.5 cm as a good starting range