

The lid of my bento box slid open. A wisp of salmon and vinegar-soaked cucumbers rose in the air. The rice had little umeboshi flowers tucked in, their pink bleeding slightly into the grains. My grandmother must've woken before dawn to pack this.

"What are you eating girl? This smells like raw fish." The girl next to me wrinkled her nose. I could hear the quiet giggles of my classmates around her.

I laughed too, but my chopsticks trembled slightly in my hand. What hurt more than the words was what they dismissed. The meal wasn't just lunch; it was a piece of my culture, and a symbol of my grandparents' pride. They run a small seafood restaurant nestled in one of the most historic quarters of Kurashiki, Japan. Fish is not a smell to be ashamed of in my family. It is the smell of love, tradition, of early morning sashimi preparation and the quiet dedication to craft.

But in that American classroom, surrounded by PB&J sandwiches and juice boxes, my lunch felt foreign. I felt foreign.

If Pippi Longstocking had been there, maybe she'd have plopped down next to me, swinging her mismatched socks. She'd peek into my box, eyes wide.

"Whoa, fish for lunch? Cool!", she'd say, and snatch a piece without asking. "You guys don't know what you're missing." She might pull out her own lunch box, putting out something even more unexpected: rainbow-colored jellybeans, or green-colored curry. The kids around us would begin to ask questions, and maybe even take a bite out of our lunch.

Pippi Longstocking doesn't flinch when the world stares. She makes the world stare back – with curiosity.

In a world that moves toward connection, misunderstandings from differences in culture or background are bound to happen. In those moments, do we shrink into silence, or do we lean in with wonder?

I think of Pippi when I hear whispers or see the quick glances people exchange. And slowly, I've learned not to laugh along. It is crucial that we speak up: not just for ourselves, but the pride and love packed in food, names, and traditions.

We all need a bit of Pippi's boldness now. To sit beside someone whose lunch smells "weird" and ask, "What's in it?" To taste. To listen. To remind the room. After all, there is no right way to eat, live, or be.