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On A Particularly Patriotic Day

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On A Particularly Patriotic Day

Abstract

I stare at myself in disgust before turning away and beginning to apply skin creams and makeup that promise a lighter complexion. I straighten my naturally thick, curly hair, methodically going over the same strand multiple times while wishing for straight hair like the other perfect blond girls in my grade. I put on a modest all black ensemble in an effort to avoid unwanted attention and pull on a large jacket with a hood to hide my face. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, cultural identity, Pakistani identity, Islamophobic bias, diversity, Muslim American

Disciplines

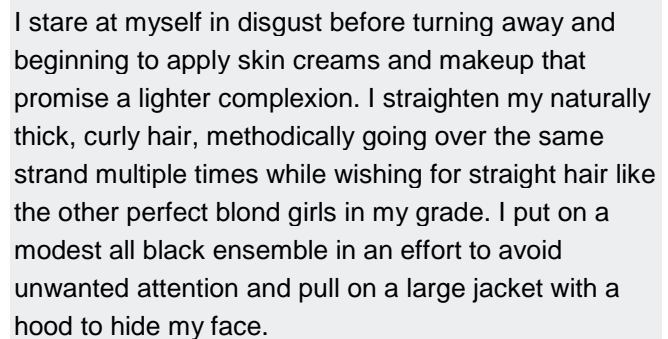
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Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu/) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

September 29, 2015



My mom hands me my lunch, which she had lovingly prepared for me at five in the morning, on my way out of the house. I peek inside the bag and smile when I see a small candy and a handwritten note that says, “I love you.” She also hands me a thermos of traditional Pakistani chai after I complained the night before that all the girls in my grade got to buy “chai tea lattes” from Starbucks before class.

When I get to school I walk to my locker where my friend greets me with, "Is your dad a terrorist? Because you are the bomb." I laugh and politely excuse myself to go to class.

In history class we are learning about ancient Indian society and a student raises his hand and says, “They are the ones that did 9/11.” Everyone turns around in their seat and looks at me. I shrink into my seat and pull my jacket around me. I can feel their hateful gazes intensify after my teacher explains, “It was actually Muslims.”

I check the contents of my lunch and to my dismay, it contains *naan*, *dal* and small pieces of *chicken tikka*. I remove the candy and the note and throw away the rest of my lunch. The fear of being teased

outweighs the pangs of hunger and my growling stomach. During lunch, I sip my delicious chai, my only source of sustenance. A girl at my lunch table asks for a sip. Upon tasting it, she makes a face and asks why I'm drinking "this fake, gross shit."

At the end of the day, my mom picks me up from school and asks if I liked my lunch. I give her a kiss and tell her I loved it. I'm almost sure she can hear the shame and guilt in my voice but she simply smiles and drives home.

These jokes and these comments in class were all sources of humiliation for me. They changed slightly from day to day, but the sentiment, whether overt or subtle, remained the same. My parents are from Pakistan. People often assumed that our Pakistani heritage automatically meant that we were Muslim. They decided, based on their assumptions and their stereotypical beliefs, that I was violent, evil and should not be trusted.

I became ashamed. I did all that I could to hide my heritage. I desperately wanted to be accepted by a culture that I felt hated everything about my Pakistani identity.

Every time September 11th rolled around, I begged my parents to stay home. I feared that on a day that evoked such strong feelings of patriotism, my parents and I would become victims of a [hate crime](#), which quintupled for Muslims after 9/11. "They wouldn't hurt you, Laila. You are American. You were born here, there's nothing to fear," my parents whispered in my ear as they sent me off to school every 9/11.

But an American identity didn't protect [Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, or Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha](#), and it didn't protect me from the hate I felt at recess when other kids whispered "terrorist" and "towel head" as I passed by them. It hasn't protected me in college either when I'm sitting in class and someone says hate crimes against Muslims are justified because "they deserve it" or when a fellow student ponders what "the Muslim world" thinks. Or, when people ask "What are you? Where are you *really* from?"

I thought that in college, my life would change. After all, college is a time to learn about the world around you and open your mind. But, the recent rhetoric on campus that champions free speech without caring if that speech is malicious in intent has only exacerbated a culture of animosity. When an associated blog labels Muslims as "liars" and "murderers" and sidewalk chalk invalidates the pain and systemic oppression of brown and black people with the words "[#ALLlivesmatter](#)", the message about who belongs and what people think of me and people like me is clear. The U.S. Constitution guarantees us the freedom of speech, but that doesn't mean insensitivity, racism, hurtful and damaging comments aren't isolating for many on campus.

In a post 9/11 society where [mainstream media](#) continuously tolerates and even encourages Islamophobic talk, policing perpetuates an [industry of fear](#), [schools arrest Muslims](#) for creativity and [politicians question President Obama's religion](#) (as if being Muslim is horrible), Islamophobic bias, fear, anger and resentment have crept into every facet of American life.

In the last 14 years, [brown has too often become synonymous with Islam](#) and Islam has too often become [synonymous with terrorism](#). When people trust these stereotypes without bothering to learn about

the diversity of Muslims and the diversity of beliefs within Islam, South Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, and [Muslim Americans are marginalized](#) around the world, throughout this country and right here on campus.

I was three years old on September 11, 2001. I've lived my entire life within the ever-present culture of Islamophobia. I was taught that I had to choose one: America or Pakistan. I chose America. But I don't know if America has chosen me.

Laila Mufty '18

Staff Editor