

## Glitterless

By Supreetha Gubbala

Two months ago, I began medical school. Like everyone around me, I was scared. Like everyone around me, I couldn't fathom how it was I finally ended up here. I unfurled nervous laughter, polite introductions and entrance into a world of strangers that would co-inhabit my life for the next four years.

For a moment, it even felt oddly intimate to be thrown together in this muddle of newness. We drove up to the Forks, ME in a jeep blasting Ed Sheeran and Nicki Minaj alongside unwanted back-up vocals from one Chinese, one Vietnamese, one Caucasian and one Indian girl eating a lobster roll. It felt silly. It felt normal inside that identity-jumbled car.

Then we arrived at the northern Maine campgrounds, and even in the lazy drizzle of rain, I could peer out at the sea of white before me. I felt my stomach sink and as much as I tried not to, I shrunk.

We were fed and boozed and told to make merry, which should have been easy. I had not been in a place so filled with people who did not have multiple accents or skin colors in years, but I attempted to be unassuming, bolder and kinder. I introduced myself to former fraternity members, all-star athletes and girls whose hair remained shockingly straight even in the persistent rain.

However, within a few minutes, I would undoubtedly make a mistake. Accidentally joking about my immigrant parents or thanking god for the diversity in Shonda Rhime's shows, I knew I was just biding my way into blank stares. Those moments are as tangible to me as a single lemon drop on the tongue. I watch as eyes slowly shift downwards and polite, curt laughter is delivered. The conversation unexpectedly subsides, and my listeners look around at other people, beer kegs and nearby grass blades.

As usual, I am confused and I am hurt. Suddenly, I wish I had played collegiate field hockey or picked blueberries at my family's vacation home on the Cape or in the very least, knew a single fact about football.

This repeats.

I have more drinks because for now, it makes it better, easier. I feel loose. I take more shots and my joke-to-thinking-about-race ratio has increased which, naturally, makes others more drawn to me. I schmooze, and charm and dance. A classmate tells me I am so exotic as he

passes a now half-full Fireball to my hand. I feel flawless: spinning, unthinking, being the charming, glittery, exotic everyone loves.

As I fall asleep in my tent, I realize for the first time that day no one can see me and I cry. Strangely, the socially awkward Chinese girl from the car ride, who randomly yells at the ducks on the nearby lake and irrationally hates most people, feels like my only friend.

One month later, we have our first doctoring and clinical skills class. It is entirely focused on racial disparities. I look around at the sea of white, and I wonder if it may surprise me and pleasantly, some individuals do. They speak profoundly of barriers facing people of color and I make a note to befriend them soon.

At this point, I have found a few people who listen intently when I worry frequently about racism in America, and who nod understandingly when I say I was not comfortable in those woods in Maine. They look at me and it feels like they see me, glitterless. I breathe more and drink less.

I begin hanging out with a new group of classmates. People who have lived abroad and are curious about other places. It is exciting, full of hope and nerve wracking because not surprisingly they are all white. I try to open up about my initial racial fears, and they ask me how I could feel that way when everyone here is so nice. "I don't know," I say. I don't bring it up again.

We study, and play and heat up food alongside each other between lectures. I float about and become socially likable for my aloof and agreeable social awkwardness. I relieve my minority "self" among the few minorities who "get it," while playing up the less morbid, blasé chick with the majority of my white classmates. I don't know how I feel about this, but it works brilliantly.

Later that fall, we have another small group discussion in our clinical skills class. This time the topic is privilege and we all take a privilege quiz on BuzzFeed as our prep work because this is truly a credible source. I walk into my learning community house, and glance at my white classmates chatting casually on the couch. I get out the usual, "Hey, how are you?" and walk by a little faster as I overhear their complaints about how awkward this conversation will be.

*"I don't even understand why we do this. I got a friggin' 73. It's just going to be awkward."*

*"I know. These conversations just make you feel shitty and guilty, it's like what's the point."*

As I walk into the discussion room, I flashback to the moment I was spinning, glitter-covered and exotic. To the time a man thought I was following him when I was just trying to find the bathroom. To when my mother called me wondering why the new neighbor had called DCS in fear she was providing illegal childcare. To the nights I opened my door to a home filled with black pain after Trayvon Martin, then Michael Brown, then a friend, were murdered consecutively. To the moment I held my roommate's burrowed face after she had been called the n-word, again.

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Tears burned slowly behind my eyes. I fought them. We began the discussion, my heart beating hoof-like and dizzy with palpitation. Underneath the table my hands shook. Mostly, I was afraid someone might see them. We began to discuss studies that show a difference in the way pain in black patients is treated differently in the emergency room versus their white counter parts.

*“I just don’t understand how a doctor can look at someone’s bones and then another person’s, and just prescribe them less pain medication because they are black? Maybe it’s unconscious, but I just don’t get it.”*

*“I understand what happened to your mom, but like, if it had happened to me, I wouldn’t have thought it was racist.”*

*“People make jokes, but it is not like they mean it. I mean, we have a black joke running around the wards right now.”*

*“I don’t know, I haven’t seen this type of ‘treating blacks differently’ in clinic.”*

I listen, and boil and try to respond eloquently to each comment because if I don’t, I know I will be disregarded. I offer my stories of trauma up for examination and watch them be picked apart by well-meaning, academically brilliant, “harmless” classmates. I watch them question the study’s validity over and over again while I wonder why a study proving racism even needs further validation.

Not a single person offers empathy. How many times had they done so for patients who stood in the front of our lectures halls to share with us the struggles of their chronic illness? How much had they done for strangers in hospital beds, that they could not do for me that day? What had made my stories less deserving in their eyes?

This is the great divide, I cannot seem to conquer.

The Black Lives Matter banner across my bedroom door glares at me from its tacky, red silk. The tears become harder to manage, and it seems I am drifting farther away. I am a first-year medical student, but I am not like everyone else. I am a socially perceptive, dark-skinned, South Asian immigrant aching to reveal my many identities. In this sea of white, I ask you, where do I go with who I am? And can you see now why, sometimes, it is just easier to glitter?

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