

White Paint and Other Lies

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I used to believe that identity was something you could package neatly, something that could be shaped to fit whatever mold was required of you. After all, I had done it myself—layering coats of white paint over a canvas splotted in black, covering the parts that didn't seem to belong. A fresh coat each time the paint started to peel. A fresh performance each time the mask began to slip.

Moving to Westport was like stepping into a world that had already written its script. Individuality was celebrated, but only in its most polished form—never raw, never messy. There was a right way to be unique, a right way to be different. I learned early on that there were two versions of myself: the one that fit and the one that didn't. The one that could blend seamlessly into the rhythm of this town, and the one that pulsed just slightly offbeat.

Being a “hyphenated American” means existing in the space between the lines. It means translating parts of yourself depending on the audience, slipping between languages, between customs, between ways of thinking. It means carrying the weight of two histories at once, even when the world only asks for one. In Westport, I have felt this duality in ways I never had before. My roots extend far beyond the pristine lawns and quiet affluence of this town, but here, those roots are invisible. The fast-paced, electrified streets of India live in my memories, the rhythmic clatter of rickshaws and the rich aroma of spice stalls feeling like echoes of another life. But in Westport, there is no space for those echoes. Here, I am expected to exist in a singular dimension. To be American in a way that is digestible. Acceptable.

The challenge is not just being different—it's being different in a way that others don't quite understand. It's the subtle mispronunciations of my name, the casual dismissal of my

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traditions as “exotic,” the assumption that my heritage is an accessory rather than an integral part of who I am. It’s the way my culture is celebrated when it’s convenient—Diwali as an aesthetic, Bollywood as a novelty—but dismissed when it challenges the narrative of what “American” should look like.

I have spent years walking the tightrope between belonging and erasure. I have become fluent in the language of masking—of saying “I’m fine” when I’m not, of laughing off moments that sting, of folding myself into smaller and smaller shapes to fit the space allotted to me. But even paint has its limits. Even masks begin to crack.

There was a moment when I realized that the burden of translation should not fall on me alone. That my identity is not something that needs to be repackaged or rebranded to be understood. That my presence—unfiltered, unpolished—is enough. The true challenge of identity is not just existing within it, but demanding that others see it for what it is, in all its complexity.

Westport has the privilege of being a town that welcomes diversity in theory, but struggles with it in practice. The change we need is not just more cultural festivals or acknowledgments in school assemblies. It’s deeper than that. It’s in the way we teach history—not as a singular narrative, but as a melting pot of perspectives. It’s in the way we talk about identity—not as a checkbox, but as an evolving story. It’s in the willingness to listen, not just to respond, but to understand.

I no longer wish to be understood in fragments. I refuse to be seen in halves. I am not just the parts of myself that are easy to digest, easy to praise, easy to fit into a pre-approved template. My identity is not something to be painted over, polished, or rebranded. It is vibrant, uncontainable, and wholly mine.

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And for the first time, I am learning to stand in that truth—without apology, without translation, without another coat of paint.