

That Token Brown Girl

by Swetha Nayak

I'm a first generation immigrant, but my parents didn't directly emigrate from India to the US. No, they took an unusually convoluted route via Micronesia and Australia. My sister and I happened to accompany them in their journey part-way through, until the four of us landed in the US over two decades ago.

My sister and I were primarily brought up in a sleepy little New England town that boasted 4,000 residents and one flashing red light.. We were one of four Indian families and, probably, one of five families of color. For the most part, I wasn't too bothered about the lack of diversity, it was fun being different. People were friendly and immediately assumed I was smart (I went along with it for as long as I could). However, after September 11th, 2001, the atmosphere shifted. We couldn't walk through grocery stores without glares in our direction. There were days in high school when I'd hear racial slurs being tossed around amidst jostles and laughs. Being brown in this little town meant being a target of white ignorance.

I was angry and proud. I was angry for obvious reasons and proud of my background, my parents' stories, and who I was. I made sure to educate my peers about how there was more to me than my brown skin. If there was a class project about religions, I would snatch "Hinduism." Countries? "India!" Dances? "Bharatanatyam, please!" I was the token brown girl, but I used it to my advantage.

Fast forward more than 15 years and I find myself living in Minnesota with a brown husband and brown kids of our own. I only hope that our children grow up to be strong, resilient, and accepting of those different from them, and I hope for others to treat them in the same way.