

# NATHAN DHAMI

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## COLLECTION OF RECOLLECTIONS

I didn't have a lot of friends growing up, but I was usually the only non-white one. This never occurred to me until I made my first black friend. I realized that he was token to me, but I was token to everyone else up until then.

For someone from a mixed background I was surrounded by a lot of white people, and until my attention was called to it I hadn't realized it was such a big deal. Maybe it was because some of my family still looked white, even though you could tell their true origin as soon as they opened their mouths and the thick Spanish *r*'s tripped over their tongues. Maybe it was because I had white uncles who married into the family, even though one of them would get frustrated when everyone would speak in our native language and watch *fútbol*. "*Why can't we watch a real American sport, like baseball?*"

The other half of my family — my father's side — was as brown as the arid Pakistan landscape they were probably from. Having been raised away from them for most of my life, because of my mother's fears that I would grow up knowing the Five Pillars instead of the Ten Commandments, I never knew for sure where my father and his siblings grew up. I soon came to the conclusion that the feeling between my parents at the time of their divorce may have been mutual, particularly when my mother's sisters started to feel like it was okay to refer to my father or his family as terrorists in front of me. I realized then, even if they denied it when I confronted them about it, that was the way they saw me, too.

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If you aren't white, white people immediately want to know where you're from. If you aren't white, it's near impossible to give an answer that white people consider adequate. The first few answers won't be the 'right' answers, even if they're the truth.

"Well, I'm from Orange County. I was born at the Children's Hospital of Orange County. But I live here."

"No, no, but, like, where are you actually from?"

Was I not from 'here,' then? I wasn't from where my parents were from. I remember doing a report in second grade on my mother's origins and

seeing that I was the only one who, on their three sided cardboard poster, had put a country or a province that wasn't part of Western Europe. And even then, I had never been to my mother's hometown, and all of my relatives lived here now. So was I not American? I felt so small and reduced. Even if my family wasn't American, I was born here, and everyone is from a family of immigrants, so what made me suddenly different?

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There's always going to be someone or something that reminds me that I'm different for not being white. Someone will say, "Oh, you don't sound Mexican," or maybe "You know, you really do look/act like a Paki!" I had a conversation with someone at a party about how it would be more difficult for me to get a job because of my last name, whereas someone with the same credentials with a 'white' name would be more likely to get the same job, to which they replied, "Yeah, but your first name sounds white, so would it really be a big deal?"

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In a moment of dark, uncomfortable honesty, my girlfriend once told me that she wouldn't know how her father would react if he met me, because when she was a little girl he had made her promise that she would only ever date or marry a nice, white religious boy. I joked that two out of four was better than nothing, but I still haven't met her father.

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When I was fifteen, a boy had stood in front of a train that ran past the tracks by my house. I was coming home on my bike on a hot July day after summer school—I was repeating a history class. Police had sectioned off the bit where the tracks intersected with the road. I didn't know any other way to get home, so I asked one of the officers for directions. She lazily gave me a street name, and so I rode off in the direction she told me, but after a few miles I couldn't find it. I was exhausted in every way a young high school boy coming home from a summer class on a rickety bicycle could be, so I rode back to the police with the intent of asking for directions. I wasn't expecting them to cuff me and search me. One of them found my student ID and made a remark that he thought was clever, about how he found it odd that I came from a school supposedly known for high test scores. Another officer gave me a lecture that the boy who killed himself, as a result of his selfishness, halted train traffic from my town all across the area, and was slowing down commuters everywhere, which in turn made it so that these taxpayers couldn't go to work and

do their jobs, creating a greater burden on the economy. He said that if I hadn't been prevented from trespassing, and if I had somehow got hit by the trains that were no longer moving for the time being, that I would only exaggerate the depression that the boy before me infected the local flow of money with. He wrote a ticket for "MISDEMEANOR—TRESPASSING" and sent me on my way.

An uncle-in-law, a police officer himself, was livid when my mother and I came to him for advice. He helped me prepare myself for the court date on the ticket, getting my story straight and even picking out a suit that I would wear to court. When we showed up to contest my crime on the date written, I was the only one who wasn't dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. My name was never called—the court didn't have my case number on file.

The ticket was just a bogus threat.

For months after that, I couldn't look at a police car without my heart jumping into my throat and a cold sweat accumulating down my back. But that was fine. In the wake of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and dozens and hundreds of countless others whose names became just another hashtag, symptomatic of a larger disease, I learned that I was lucky to walk away with just that.

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*American Sniper* opened in the United States on Christmas 2014. Frustrated by the jingoistic film adaptation of Chris Kyle's racist memoirs, many Americans of Muslim or Middle Eastern descent made known their discontent, on campuses, at theaters, and on message boards. When I added my voice to the sea of others in an attempt at solidarity, a Twitter user with a Confederate flag profile picture and a background photo of him sitting on a truck with a pile of guns replied to me with "the only good durka is a dead one."

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I tried to explain to a cousin at a family dinner my concerns and frustrations about police. He, like me, was mixed. He was the son of the uncle who helped me before. His uncle was white, his first and last names were 'white,' and he looked like an average hipster white boy—skinny, soft pale skin, thick brown sandy hair with an undercut. He didn't speak any Spanish. No one would guess he was half-Latino from looking at him or listening to him. We were close in age, and, at one point in time, had similar tastes, so I thought I could trust him to at least listen to my problems.

"Police discriminate disproportionately against people of color," I said. "I appear more suspicious to them than you do because I 'fit a description.' And you know why that is? It's because I look brown. You can get away with a lot more than I can because you look white."

My cousin rolled his eyes at me. "That's not true at all. Police are equally brutal towards everyone. You can't just say that they're singling you people out."

My right eye twitched at 'you people,' then I listed the names of as many victims of blue-on-black violence as I could recount. I even went further and explained that even criminals are painted differently if they're white compared to people of color. "As soon as they arrested the guy from Chapel Hill, they immediately tried to justify why someone would shoot three Muslim students. And the best they could come up with? 'Parking dispute,' they said."

He continued to smirk at me. "I think you're making all of this stuff up. No one's gonna just shoot you just because you look a certain way."

"I would." Another white uncle-in-law of mine appeared.

I turned to look at him with an expressionless face. There was no proper way to convey how shocked I was through body language.

"I'd do it," he repeated, pointing at me. "If I didn't know who you were, and I saw you, I'd be scared. I'd probably shoot you. I'd think you were a terrorist or some shit." Then he shambled away, looking for another beer.

I raised my eyebrow at my cousin, as if to say *See?* and I left the table and went upstairs into one of the bedrooms. I was tired. I still am.