

Perpetual Foreigners

By Anonymous

One early fall, I was returning home with my parents from a road trip when we needed to stop and get gas and use the restrooms. It was late at night and we were at a rest stop close to the border of Massachusetts and New York. There were maybe two others car filling their tanks but we were the only people who went into the small rest stop. The rest stop was actually so small it was sort of like a convenience store and you had to pass the cashier on your left as you walked to the right towards the restrooms. We're people of color and you can clearly tell by looking at my parents of our faith. My dad has a beard and my mom wears a headscarf. She also happens to wear clothing native to her birthplace rather than western clothes. This always mean she stands out and because my dad is a brown man with a beard, he also stands out.

My parents and I went inside the rest stop and we parted ways, my dad went towards the men's room, while my mom and I went towards the ladies' room. A little while later, on our way out of the restrooms, I could hear two men talking and as it happens it was about my dad! Unbeknownst to us, my dad had left the store just a few steps before us. As my mom and I were turning the corner but before the men could see us, one asked something inaudible about my dad while the other responded "I don't know, he was with two women. Where's he from?", but as I saw them they were two white men intently staring out of the store window in the direction of our car, where my dad was sitting and waiting for us studying my dad. They didn't say anything to us as we left, but there was an uncomfortable tension in the air. When I got in the car, I told my dad what transpired and he laughed, and I hadn't realized it, but his calmness made me feel safe.

I worry for my parents' safety all the time. This is not the first time my dad has been judged because of the way he looks. After 9/11, there's been a lot of Islamophobia in this country. My dad has been asked by uninformed neighborhood teens who observed him doing yardwork in our backyard "Are you a terrorist?", co-workers have laughingly made unprofessional jokes like "You're not going to blow us up, are you?", and he's been told from random strangers "Go back to Iraq" – we're not from Iraq, but even if we were, that's never ok to say to anyone. I don't think my family or I need to validate ourselves or our place in society. We've been in America for over 30 years and are Americans citizens yet are still looked at as the perpetual foreigners. Why is it so difficult for our society to accept that it's ok to look different and still belong? Isn't America the great big melting pot where people are free and can achieve whatever dream they set out to? It now feels like the dream is no longer relevant, but rather survival is at the forefront in a place where there is a constant lack of acceptance.