

The Brown Girl

Category: Immigrants

written by Neeta Nayak | May 13, 2025

I was 25 years old when I started my internship. My heart palpitated on my first day, as I made rounds on a long patient list. I was dressed in a long skirt and blouse under my white coat. My raven hair, brown eyes, and Indian accent made me stand out.

All my patients were cooperative and my day was going well—until I got to my last patient.

Mrs. S was a frail lady with tightly permed silver hair. Peeking out from under her covers, she took one look at me and asked in a Southern accent, “Who said you can enter?”

Taken aback by her hostility, I introduced myself as the resident physician. She responded, “You don’t sound like you’re from here. When are you going home?”

I had only been in the U.S. a week at that point, and she exacerbated my feelings of being “the odd one out.” For the first time in my life, I was driving on the “wrong” side of the road, living in a neighborhood where nobody looked like me, and interacting with deep Southern accents—all things foreign to me.

But I had patients to see. Mrs. S stayed on my list. She would question my credentials daily. She would ask, “When are you leaving?” She would call me “brown girl,” yet called everyone else by their title.

Facing disdain for being an immigrant, something intrinsic to my identity, was incredibly painful. Every time before I walked into her room, I would whisper a silent prayer and prepare for scorn. I heaved a sigh of relief when she was discharged.

Imagine my dread a year later when she returned to the service. Fully expecting the worst, I was unprepared when she said, “Dr. N, I’m sorry for my behavior last year. You’ve been kinder than all the folks here put together. I shouldn’t have been mean. I felt bad and have prayed since I was discharged.”

I looked at her carefully, searching for an ulterior motive, but realized her apology was genuine.

She had appreciated the dignity I brought to her bedside and eventually began trusting my judgment. Her behavior was likely due to a mistrust of the system and misperception of immigrants.

Fear can arise when we are unable to understand someone and view them as being a member of an out-group. But in the process of affording her compassionate dignity, I realized that we weren’t actually so different after

all—something she had also learned.

We had both grown as humans!

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