

“I Want to Be Clean, Pretty, and White”

By Zawar Ahmed

“By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Writing Center to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Yale College website or in a booklet prepared for Yale College students or faculty.”

On bad days, I imagine myself sitting cross-legged in a white room with no doors. This room measures 7 ft. by 11 ft. much like my own but the bed is gone, the desk is missing, and my plants are long dead. There is nothing in this room but me, a stack of laundry, clean, pretty, and white, and a door-less closet. It’s abnormally short for its kind and still it stares down at me, a dark and empty void.

I’m scared of this closet.

But I stay by its side, folding the clothes into neat little rectangles. This is because for the last week, my mind has been jumping from thought to thought like a child playing hopscotch. The barbed wire around my neck tightens every time it takes a leap so carelessly, till my breathing stops and my eyes leak. It happened suddenly one night when I tried to go to sleep, and again in an Endowment Justice Coalition meeting, and then again during poor Paul Bloom’s psychology class, and even on a 2 a.m. snack run to the Good Nature Market with friends.

And so, I’m folding and folding and folding until the clothes are as small as those pesky laws of physics allow, and I return them to the closet. I like to imagine that my door-less, dark closet can hold all of my pretty, white things.

On bad days I do laundry, and I think by now you know that today is an especially bad day.

...

It all begins with a spill. Shut in my dorm room, I mix together black tea, lukewarm water, powdered milk, and confectioner's sugar to concoct the saddest excuse for *chai*. This is how I know that I miss home, or at least the utility it provides me. At home, I cocoon myself in my bed every day and *Baba* brings a fresh cup of *chai* to my side without fail (a confession of love, or maybe an apology); holding it in my lap, I feel safe. He was not always so soft but coming to America has changed all of us. The angry, proud doctor has been tamed, and he's more empathetic than he ever was. I'm different too now, more afraid of spills at the very least. There is a running joke in my family that I can never drink *chai* without feeding half of it to my clothes first, and the moment I think about this, I notice the patch of brown blossoming onto my clean white shirt. If *Baba* was here now, he would tease me if it was a good day and scold me on a bad one. *Jazbati nahin hona*. "No matter what happens, don't get emotional," he'd say, remembering the mistakes he's made. I've made one too many spills this week so it's time to do laundry.

I slide out of my bed, exchange the contaminated shirt for another, and toss it into the laundry basket. It's already full but looking at all the clothes packed into my closet, I could fill ten more baskets easily. My eye catches on another shirt I've been trying to forget—a muted grass-green, with a hand gently offering up a rose. I wore this shirt two days ago on a beautiful night I've already forgotten or perhaps am trying hard to forget.

My body goes through the motions. I am putting on my coat now, plugging in headphones, carrying the basket down the stairs of my dorm building, then jaywalking across the street, down another set of stairs, and into the laundry room. But my mind is on that day I wore the green shirt.

...

“What is your most traumatic memory?” he asks.

Perhaps this is a nonchalant question, but it warrants a serious answer. It’s 3 a.m. and the three of us are in my common room and it’s dark, except for the leftover white Christmas lights still weaving through the walls, and the soft glow of the TV humming slowed versions of already-slow songs, and the big windows through which the dark-gray night sky spills through. The two of us are lying on the floor and the third is curled up on the armchair, and I should be happy. Maybe this is all I’ve wanted for a long time.

“Can y’all think of any? I can’t come up with one,” he adds quickly. Too quickly.

At my request, we’re playing 36 questions like we always do, and I’ve gotten good at this game. I can tell you about coming to America at ten, about dreaming about bleaching my skin, about poverty, about utter loneliness, about my intrinsic dissatisfaction with myself being my favorite thing about me. But all of that is easy.

I learned to perform vulnerability a long time ago. To start, you must pick a trauma. For me, it was easy to pick race because it wasn’t actually my decision at all. White people everywhere begged me to do it, mouths watering with lust at its every mention. They demanded, and I gave them what they wanted. Soon, they flocked to me and offered hugs (a confession of love, or maybe an apology); holding them in my arms, I felt loved. When they got bored, I went hunting for other traumas to supply – immigration, poverty, self-hate. The only thing I had left to commodify was my trauma, and so it became a pre-packaged product to be sold for connection. This process hurts at first, but soon the pain will dull and you’ll notice that for the time being, you are not alone. Maybe this sharing is a magic trick—the transformation of trauma into social

currency. Maybe it's a barbed wire that wraps around your throat and mine, stopping you from leaving me.

I've tamed many traumas, but the question at hand is still difficult to answer. There are some things too dangerous to be said out loud, and some traumas better left untouched. And yet, these days, they've been on the tip of my tongue, threatening to bubble over. Maybe I want you to know.

"I can think of one," I say hesitantly, breaking the silence.

I can see the white room in my head, except I've stopped stashing the clothes away for a moment.

I remember the day.

...

i'm half as tall as i am now, and probably half as old. i'm hiding behind the door to the entrance of my house in pakistan. all i can see is darkness, except one pillar of bright light spilling in. i didn't do anything wrong. my heart is beating so fast and the barbed wire around my neck is there too, tightening. i can't breathe. footsteps, closer and closer still. barbed wire tighter and tighter. the scent of *chai* hangs thick in the air and i can still taste the fruitcakes from earlier. it's not my fault. i repeat it again and again. *Allah*, you know it too, don't you? i hear him shouting, screaming. things breaking. i don't know where those two went but i can't worry about that now. guilt. my heart is banging on my ribs from the inside, begging to be let out, to run away. but it's too late.

...

The rhythmic beating stops abruptly and there is silence. The washer is done.

This is a story you don't get to consume. Is your mouth watering, lusting for more? This is only one of many, maybe not even the worst. The details of the trauma aren't important, only that it exists. You have yours and I have mine, but I'm willing to make an exchange.

I move the clothes to the dryer and resume my wait. Sinking into one of those unsightly red leather sofas in the corner of the room, I realize that I'm not alone here. There are others doing laundry, and for a moment I want to imagine that you are too. The thought crosses my mind that most people don't realize it, but we're all just trying to be clean, pretty, and white. And then I get angry at them, at you, at me, maybe at the world, because we never will be. And still, no one turns to me and says "hey, here's all of my dirty laundry," even though I want to know more than anything.

What are you hiding? All you do is look past me, no matter how many times I perform my loneliness for you—in the tilt of my head, the depth of my sighs, the frequency of my blinks, in my silence. On days like this, I wish you would hit me, leave me bruised because it's more easily handled than this cycle in my head. If trauma is all I have left to give, I want to give it to you. And I think you don't want it, and that thought hurts the most of all.

Sitting on that sofa, staring intently into space, I go back to that day I almost said things which can never be said out loud. I can't believe I was such a fool.

...

"Can y'all think of anything? I can't come up with one," he adds quickly. Too quickly.

"I can think of one," I say hesitantly.

Pause. A long one.

"But not tonight. It's just not the right vibe."

Like always, I'm a coward.

...

Hours later, the night ends and I am alone again like always, and the bad taste in my mouth from swallowing the words doesn't go away. I don't know this at the time but for days to come, I will try to wash it down with *chai*, or coffee when desperate, but all I will do is spill and spill. I will do it before going to bed, in an Endowment Justice Coalition meeting, in poor Paul Bloom's psychology class, and on a 2 a.m. snack run to the Good Nature Market with friends. The barbed wire around my throat will only get tighter from here.

...

Lost in my thoughts, I've already retrieved the clothes from the dryer, climbed the stairs out of the laundry room, crossed the street, climbed another three flights of stairs, and entered my room. My clothes have been wiped clean of any traces of my failures, and they are clean, pretty, and white.

Now, I am sitting in a room measuring 7 ft. by 11 ft. much like the one I like to imagine, except it's not as sterile as I'd like it to be. There is a bed and a desk and some plants, still holding on to life no matter how long I starve them of water. I've been trying to convince myself you're a lost cause, but I don't want to lose you.

Today is a bad day and I keep on repeating *Baba's* words in my head. *Jazbati nahin hona*. Don't get emotional. I am sitting cross-legged across the closet, folding and folding and folding the stacks of clothes into neat little rectangles. *Jazbati nahin hona*.

I'm forcing all of my clothes into the closet now, but I don't think it can hold them when the laundry basket is empty and all of them are clean. It won't comply like the dark little closet

buried in my head. I push and I push but those pesky laws of physics are in the way again like always, and I have failed like always.

If trauma is all I have, I wonder who I'll be once I'm foolish enough to trust you and give it all way. Someone in pain, I think. Someone clean, pretty, and white, I hope.