

Out of My Skin

by Leyla Kamalick

I am white. No, let me rephrase that. My skin is white.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that you've heard this story before in a million different ways from a million different angles. But bear with me.

I am American. I was born in Texas, just outside of Houston, and have lived there all my life. My sister was born in Chicago. Astute observers say we look almost exactly alike. Which is true. The features of our faces, the structure of our bones, our smiles, are almost identical. But only the astute observer notices that. When someone compares us with a cursory glance, we look very different indeed. Zeyna's skin is a dark, beautiful olive color. Like my mother's. My sister looks like an Arab. I do not.

I did not inherit my mother's skin color. I have my father's fairer tone. And for the past six years or so of my life, the disjunction between the color and the culture that I inherited has been a source of constant thought for me. My mother's family is Palestinian, and most of her relatives, living in the States, have experienced one kind of prejudice or harassment or another. My sister, looking like the rest of the family, has also run across ignorance first hand. But my skin has protected me. This pale color has kept me safe. People don't know who I am unless I choose to tell them. More and more these days, I fear and hope that I will have to face that choice and its consequences.

I had a close brush with it just a few days ago. In a class taught by a Jewish professor, I had the option of writing a paper on my Arab heritage. Suddenly, I was faced with a multitude of questions: Should I take the opportunity and, in doing so, reveal my identity as an Arab-American, or should I choose another topic? Could I trust a Dartmouth professor? Was it fair for me to be asking this question? Was it an unfair judgement on a professor that I hardly knew? I think that most Jews in America are not anti-Arab, but I also know that there are those who are. Was there a way that I could tell without risking too much of myself? Who could I turn to for help?

It was that last question that finally stumped me. Having had the opportunity to help create Shamis, the new Arab culture and issue group on campus, I had a few Arab friends I knew would understand me, but that was too little. I suddenly felt very alone.

For a campus that prides itself on diversity, on recruiting minorities, on providing a safe space for students of all backgrounds, there is little here for the Arab or Arab-American student. Before Shamis,

with its two helpful (though non-Arab) advisors, was created, there was nothing at all. Dartmouth does not recruit Arabs. Dartmouth does not have an advisor or assistant dean for Arabs. Dartmouth does not even provide a box on welcoming information to incoming students that allows them to identify themselves as Arabs or Arab-Americans. At Dartmouth, we barely exist.

Dartmouth is not alone. Colleges and universities across the country have done little for the Arab student, though much has been done for students of almost every other minority. But things are starting to change. Little by little, here and there, a few colleges are beginning to change their policies and work towards true diversity. Eventually, I hope, all campuses will do the same. But I love Dartmouth, and I want the College on the Hill to be at the front of the pack, leading the country, not stumbling behind.

And yet, I have so little time to change things. As a senior, my life as an undergraduate at Dartmouth is drawing to a close. I can only help Dartmouth to take its very first steps. I can only push a little in the hope that others after me will push much more.

So this is the risk I'm taking. This is my choice to open myself to you whom I do not know. I am telling you who I am so that when you see my white skin, you will know that there is still so much we don't know about each other. Dartmouth has the chance to recognize a minority that has been silenced for so long. I hope that this college is one of the first to give the Arab-American a voice.

Leyla Kamalick is a 2002 honors graduate of Dartmouth College, and will be teaching English in a private school next year.

©2002 Leyla Kamalick

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Middle East Activist. We welcome your comments.