



NEWS. ARTS. CULTURE. EVENTS. MARKETPLACE. BALTIMORE
CITY PAPER

 **GO**

Sign up for our mailing list.

Get issue contents, specials, and highlights in your inbox.

- **NEW!** Photos from our latest stories, parties, and events PHOTOS.CITYPAPER.CC
- **HOT!** The results are in **2012 BEST OF BALTIMORE**

BLOGS: THE NEWS HOLE ARTS+MINDS X-CONTENT FEEDBAG NOISE BALTIMANUAL COLLEGE GUIDE LOVE/HATE CONTACT US ADVERTISE IN CP

Like 0

Tweet 0

0

PRINT

EMAIL

UNDERWHELMED

People Like Us

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 12/11/2002

So I'm out there on Thursday afternoon trying to dig my car out of the snow, and this old white guy is on the other side of the street, leaning on his shovel and staring at me, half-smiling. As one of only a few dark-skinned people who live in my South Baltimore neighborhood, I'm used to being stared at, especially by the folks in their 60s or 70s who probably remember--and, considering how icy some of their stares are, probably miss--the days when *people like me* were even rarer in these parts. But I did what I normally do and smiled, which this guy took to be an invitation to come over and talk.

He strides across the icy packed snow in the middle of the street, and the first words out of his mouth are, "What are you?" Just like that.

He wants to know if I'm Pakistani, or Indian, or Hindu. But then, before I can answer, he wants to know if Indian and Hindu are the same thing or from the same country, or what, because he's always found it very confusing. So I satisfy his curiosity and tell him I'm Indian, and explain that Indian is a nationality but Hindu is a religious affiliation. Then he says, "I was looking at you, and I just couldn't figure out what you were--Indian or black or what--because you're very dark, but your features look Pakistani or something. That was my guess."

I normally bristle at such encounters, but I wasn't getting an ornery or obnoxious vibe off this guy, just a rather clumsy curiosity and a poor grasp of basic social etiquette. In fact, the guy--Bill's his name--turned out to be a harmless nut-job who, after laying to rest his agitated questions about my ethnic origins, proceeded to shovel out my car in one-third the time it would have taken me, all the while expounding on his love of deer hunting, his past problems with alcohol, his wife of 40 miserable years, his blind grandson who can sing like Mario Lanza but blew off his scholarship to the Peabody, his lawyer who's cheating him out of his asbestos settlement, and so on and so forth. When one of his neighbors emerged from her front door, the old guy momentarily ceased his colorful complaint-fest to flirt: "Hi Nancy, I'm just helping out my new girlfriend here!" As soon as my car's tires were clear, Bill wished me luck, said, "Nice talking to you," and walked away. He didn't bother to ask my name, and I didn't bother to offer it.

Since then I've been thinking a lot about how nonchalantly I responded to Bill's blunt question: *What are you?* When I was younger, these kinds of (tiresomely frequent) queries from strangers shamed and upset me more than I liked to admit. (I will never forget the guy behind the counter at a pizza place in Hoboken, N.J., circa 1987, who smiled and said, "But the way you talk, you don't sound Indian!?"--to which my ballsy friend Judi shot back, "Are you also surprised that I don't sound black?!" Poor guy was struck dumb.)

Apparently I've matured, or grown a thicker skin, or lost some of my capacity for righteous indignation, or something. These days, the myriad little encounters with strangers demanding to know "what I am" amuse more than offend. Whatever the source of this new calm is, I have one major reason to be grateful for it now.

At some point in the coming year, probably, I will become the adoptive mother of a child who will not share my racial background and may look nothing like me. I'm therefore preparing myself for the inappropriate questions of strangers, which will no doubt vary in tone from simple curiosity to snooty rudeness to outright bigotry. But I know there's a certain delicacy required here. Undoubtedly, someone will stop us in the street to ask, "Is that child *really yours?*" or to wonder out loud, "I suppose she must take after her father . . . ?" Undoubtedly, some total stranger will think nothing of saying, within the child's earshot, "How on earth could the mother give away such an adorable child?" When these things happen, I want to be self-assured, firm, and appropriately protective--not defensive or unreasonably quick to anger. I want to be able to deflect other people's rudeness and idiocy without telegraphing fear or shame to my child. If a child sucks up that poison, it can stay in her system for ages.




CITY PAPER dating



How about we... find out who makes the best burger in town then eat that burger.

TAXI DRIVERS WANTED 01/09/2013
 TAXI DRIVERS: Computerized dispatch. Take car home at night. Make \$100+ per day! HOW SOON DO YOU WANT TO START MAKING ...

 Retrieving RSS feed(s)

More featured business in Baltimore

Browse the Local Business Directory

[MORE AT CITYPAPERJOBS.COM](#) | [View all ads](#)

[More at LIVE HERE BALTIMORE](#) | [View all ads](#)

Baltimore City Paper

812 Park Ave.
 Baltimore, MD 21201
 (410) 523-2300

[CONTACT CP](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [NATIONAL ADVERTISING](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [WORK HERE](#) | [STAFF DIRECTORY](#)

All parts of this site Copyright ©2011 Baltimore City Paper.

Editorial

News+Features
 Murder Ink
 Columns
 Comics

Blogs

Arts and Minds
 Feedbag
 Noise
 The News Hole
 X-Content

Online Features

Crossword
 Maps

The Arts

Arts
 Visual Arts
 Stage
 Books+Publishing

Film

Film+Video
 Movie Times

Music

Music
 Local Music
 Music Events
 Big Music Issue

Eats + Drinks

Restaurant Reviews
 Find a Restaurant
 Eat Special Issue
 Find a Club

Events

Search Calendar Events
 Enter Calendar Event
 Art
 Benefit
 Business
 Comedy
 Community Action
 Dance and Dancing
 Film
 Gay and Lesbian
 Kids
 Music
 Notices
 Seniors
 Special events
 Sports and Recreation
 Stage
 Talks Plus
 Words

Best of Baltimore

Best of Baltimore Home

Special Issues

Eat Special Issue
 Big Books Issue
 Film Fest Frenzy
 Sizzlin Summer
 Big Music Issue
 Comics Contest
 Fiction and Poetry Contest
 Holiday Guide
 Top Ten

Article Archives

Search Articles
 Search Authors
 Search Issues
 Latest Comments
 Whose Responsible?

Classified

Classified Home
 Place Ad
 Jobs
 Services
 Stuff For Sale
 Massage
 Dating
 Adult

Real Estate

Real Estate
 For Rent
 Rent Guide
 Place Ad

Automotive

Cars, Trucks+More
 Services

City Paper Stuff

Win Free Stuff
 Citypaper Events
 Party Pics

Social Media

Event and Issue Newsletters
 Facebook
 Twitter
 Flickr
 Youtube

Patio & Porch Columns

www.PacificColumns.com

Choose your own column style. Buy Direct & Save. Quick Shipping.

AdChoices 



I know this because I still have a definite sense-memory of my immigrant parents' profound unhappiness as they suffered the petty racist indignities of the 1960s and early 1970s. I absorbed my parents' fear and shame like a cloth soaking up red dye, and since then I've been trying to bleach myself clean of all that anguish. I wish I could go back in time and tell my young, insecure parents--with all the precocious wisdom of a child actor in a movie--the thing it took me decades to figure out, the thing I hope I'm strong enough to impart to my child. We were who we were. We were what we were. And we had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, because we weren't the ones being ignorant and rude.

Related Stories

Underwhelmed archives

More from **Sandy Asirvatham**

That's All She Wrote (12/25/2002)

If you want someone to blame or to thank, let me suggest the novelist Paul Auster as a pretty good...

Going Green (11/27/2002)

Sometimes it feels like the good, right, personally healthful, environmentally responsible choice.

Fakebook (11/13/2002)

Becoming a professional jazz musician means accepting that 99 percent of the time you're nothing...

0 comments

★ 0

Comments for this thread are now closed. [X]

Discussion | Community | Share [Settings]

No one has commented yet.

ALSO ON BALTIMORE CITY PAPER

Why Gun Permit Records Maybe Should Be Public 7 comments

Dave Tedder 7 comments

Winning Ugly 5 comments

Spitballin' - Columns - Baltimore City Paper 7 comments

I Can Make That! 1 comment

Headbangers Ball - Music - Baltimore City Paper 4 comments

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

[What's this?](#)

How to Attract Advertising Revenue Without Banner Ads Disqus

10 cloud collaboration predictions for 2013 Central Desktop

Disqus Says 10,000 Publishers Are Using Its New Revenue Platform The Next Web

Testing Shows Strong Results for New Native Ad Format The Next Web

You're collaborating, but are you an extreme collaborator? Central Desktop

The A, B, C's of Promoting Content Disqus

Find us on Facebook



Baltimore City Paper

Like You like this.



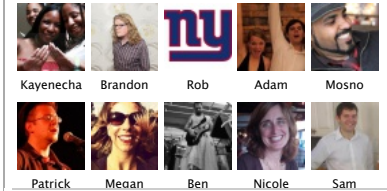
Baltimore City Paper

GIVEAWAY! Comment below (once per person) to enter to win a pair of tickets to "The Mountaintop" (now on stage at [CENTERSTAGE](#))! The tickets are good for use any time between now and Feb. 24th.

The Mountaintop

tix.centerstage.org
The Lorraine Hotel. April, 1968. In room 306, Dr. King unwinds and prepares. A visit from a hotel maid offers welcome diversion and a

14,808 people like **Baltimore City Paper**.



Facebook social plugin

Comment feed | Subscribe via email