Reading

T.S.A. and Cinnamon Buns

By Ruhani Chhabra

"You're going to have to take that thing off, sir."

Yet another T.S.A. officer had just arrived. I cast a nervous glance at my father, who was extremely calm, even as he explained — for the third time — that he couldn't unwrap the turban on his head. One, it would take too long to put back on. Two, it was against his faith.

The sentence hung heavily in the cinnamon-scented air. I resisted the urge to run through the metal detectors, shoes on and everything.

Make no mistake, I didn't want to be embarrassed about my religion; in Sikhism, dignity is as fundamental as the turban. But when you're 12 years old, awkward, pimply and painfully aware of the stares and mutterings from speedy holiday travelers, it's hard to muster that pride.

It shouldn't have turned out like this. My father and I had embarked on an impromptu trip to surprise his relatives, and the events resembled a Charlie Brown Christmas special — until we reached that dreaded corner of the airport.

To distract myself, I concentrated on the sugary aroma coming from the diner in the terminal. We always ate there before our flights; I loved their cinnamon buns. I associated a peculiar sense of freedom with those baked goods — their sweet taste meant we'd finished with security, freed of scrutiny.

Having brown skin and a head-covering means you're practically begging for a "random" T.S.A. check. I figured that out at around the same age that I learned how to put on an airplane seatbelt on my own. However, this demand was significantly worse. Still, I wanted him to comply, wanted to rid myself of the scathingness of being "different."

My father, who knew he would forever be considered "different" from the moment he walked into this country, persisted. He'd been to this airport before, and they let him have his turban scanned instead of removing it — what could've changed?

"It's the holiday season," the palest officer said, rolling his eyes. "Security is tighter. Just make a decision. Can't you see your little girl's waiting too?"

If I was embarrassed before, it was nothing compared to how I felt now. With all eyes on me, I wanted to shrink to the ground.

I had always feared the possibility of such humiliating "precautions" imposed on my father, and I had always thought that I would speak up. Even a simple "Don't talk to him that way" would suffice.

Yet I looked up, turned to my father, and said, "Just take it off." And the way he sighed let me know that I'd won. It was a rather haunting victory.

Perhaps I'm being too harsh on my younger self. After all, I was severely insecure and surrounded by years worth of schoolyard ignorance ("So . . . why does your dad wear that rag?"), which morphed into my buried shame, and it took me a while to realize I had to dispel it. It took me even longer to learn how.

In the years to come, I'd discover the cathartic space of transcribing my feelings on paper. At that moment, though, I simply internalized everything: the embarrassment, the confusion and, most of all, the gnawing guilt. I watched impassively as my father removed his turban, every layer of meaningful fabric peeled away in front of a whole crowd.

The officers, circling him like angry piranhas, took one long look and then dismissed us. It was over.

Or so I thought. My father, never one to hold a grudge, still bought me some cinnamon buns. I took them onto the flight and looked out the window at the bright blue American sky, wondering why they didn't taste as sweet as before.[1]

1 "The Winners of Our 3rd Annual Personal Narrative Essay Contest for Students," *New York Times,* January 20, 2022.