

## Black (white) Coat

I'm awake seconds before my alarm goes off—a newfound normal for me these past few months. The shadows of the trees outside of my apartment move and sigh in the early morning wind, looking more menacing than they ought to as the last of summer dies out.

I glance around my darkened room, my eyes falling upon my scrubs that I had laid out across my chair and my bag that I had neatly packed the night before. Someone had once told me that I should get into the habit of packing my things the night before, as your brain was scientifically incapable of executing more than primal reflexes before 6 AM. Though they were being only slightly facetious about the sleep deprivation that characterized clerkship year, I took their advice seriously after one too many panicked mornings spent scrambling.

I pull my comforter off, my mattress groaning in protest as I get out of bed and head towards the bathroom. I turn on the light, wincing at its brightness. I examine my appearance in the mirror. *Oh, good, for once, my bonnet didn't slip off in the middle of the night and somehow end up across the room*, I note as I remove the fabric that I have a love-hate relationship with and began undoing and brushing out my pin curls.

I complete the rest of my abbreviated morning routine as fast as I can, keeping an eye on the clock. Before clerkships, I would take my time in the morning, romanticizing the morning by pretending to be in one of those “get ready with me” videos that are ubiquitous on social media. Now, updates and assignments from the chief resident are the only reason my phone is making any noise this early.

As I brush my teeth, I use one hand to open Epic on my phone, scroll down to the team's list, and begin reading about my new patient. I spit my toothpaste out, wincing when it almost lands on my phone.

Within five minutes, I'm out the door, heading to New Haven with too much coffee in my system and not enough food in my belly. I arrive at the unit that I have been assigned to for the past two weeks, and my team greets me eagerly—well, as eagerly as they can before 6 AM. I like my team; the pediatric residents love to teach and care and fiercely advocate for their patients. These attributes make it sting a little less when I realize, and not for the first time by a long shot, that I am the only Black person on the team.

It would be naïve to say that this is completely foreign feeling to me. During college, I was one of a handful of Black students in my pre-medical classes (“No, Professor Smith, despite coming to your office hours every week, I’m not Kelly or Michelle or the other *other* Black woman in your class”). During didactics, I pretended to not feel the surreptitious glances thrown my way when lecturers, the supposed leaders of their field with too many accolades to count, claimed that Black people had poorer outcomes with certain medications, giving no explanation other than strongly implying that race exists as a biological construct.

Some days, I felt bold enough to openly question and push back against this notion. After all, the opportunity to walk the very halls from which people of color were discriminated against as an authentic, unapologetically Black person is the DNA of my “why medicine.”

Most days, however, my bones ache under the pressure, and I am tired. Tired of paying the minority tax that seems to only grow and never lessen. Tired of having to justify my presence in the face of the Supreme Court or the current political administration. Tired of advocating for patients of color in an institution that seems unwilling to dismantle their biases and move

towards a better future (“I don’t think we should consult dermatology because this isn’t a rash...it’s hyperpigmentation...that’s just melanin”). Tired of adhering to the adage that I must work twice as hard for half of the recognition, the unsettling fact that this will be my reality as a medical professional until the day I take my last breath. *Tired.*

After getting sign-out regarding my old patients, I track down the overnight, admitting resident to hear about my new patient. She is sporting perpetual dark bags under her eyes, and she stares longingly at the exit before sighing and launching into her presentation.

She starts, “Kevin\* is a Black 15-year-old *man*...”

Her opening line hits me at once, and I can’t help but wince, knowing that the words “15-year-old” and “man” do not ever belong in the same sentence, and if Kevin had identified as anything other than Black, these words would not have been carelessly strung together. I am reminded that the innocence of childhood is not a commodity afforded to Black youth.

“...he’s a big boy, he must weigh more than 300 pounds...”

I pray the other residents do not catch me visibly reacting to her words. I try cutting out her biased remarks to focus on the objective. Still, even as I focus on his chief concern, history, and physical exam, I am not immune to her biased remarks as they slither past the defenses I had erected in my mind, painting a picture of my patient so vivid that I could almost trick myself into believing that this fairly represented him without once laying eyes on him.

I knock on Kevin’s door and introduce myself as the medical student on his team that would be caring for him. His mom, who spent the night on the couch in the most uncomfortable tucked position known to humanity, rises and crosses the room to shake my hand, glancing at her son with worry as clear as day in her eyes.

I spend a half an hour talking to Kevin and his mom, getting the history from them rather than the chart or a presentation. I learn that Kevin is his mom's best friend, and he enjoys playing video games but has not been able to for the past couple of days due to his debilitating headache. I learn that his mom is concerned about being able to travel between her home and the hospital without a car. I learn that today is his birthday. During rounds, with the help of my resident, I present him from scratch, highlighting important objective information but also attempting to shape and mold the team's perspective of him free from biases.

A member of the team cuts me off, scoffing, "Well, I think his headache can't be that bad. He needs to stop moping and get up. Probably hasn't done that before."

My granola bar from this morning churns uncomfortably in my stomach.

A resident from a consulting team agrees, stating that although they recommended against surgical intervention at this time, he should stay NPO because "he can afford to skip a few meals."

I bit my tongue so hard that I draw blood. I feel like my sanity is slipping away, as if I am the only one who hears or sees the obvious. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want—

What I want becomes irrelevant the moment I find out that Kevin was rushed into an emergency surgery. The words, "*guess it was more than a headache, huh*" sit bitter on my tongue as I leave for the day, driving home in complete silence and reflecting on anything and everything all at once.

Everyone remembers their white coat ceremony. The sounds of your family cheering in the background despite being asked to hold their applause until the end; the indescribable mixture of pride and fear coursing through your veins as you cross the stage, praying that you don't trip. Sometimes, I feel like instead of receiving a white coat during the ceremony, I donned

a Black coat. On one hand, I am proud of this hypothetical Black coat, because it signifies the sacrifices and hard-fought battles won by the giants whose shoulders I stand upon today. It signifies using my identity to take the first steps towards mending a relationship between the Black community and a medical system that they understandably mistrust given its ugly history. On the other hand, the Black coat is a physical manifestation of my exhaustion: my exhaustion of being tokenized and exploited for unrecognized, uncompensated labor for a system that would discard me at the drop of a hat.

*Tired.*

The next morning, I open my eyes moments before the dreaded alarm beeps. I wash my face and get dressed, reading about Kevin's overnight events on my phone as I brush my teeth. I stop at the door where I had packed my things the night before. I allow myself one deviation from my methodical routine: a pause at the front door with my hand on the doorknob. Something slips over my shoulders and the universal blue scrubs that students wear. It is heavy, and my shoulders reflexively roll under its weight. This is more than I have carried before, but I can already feel myself acclimating to the added weight. It does not fade away entirely, but it silences to a tolerable whisper. I understand why I must carry this weight, this Black coat; yet, it never gets easier, and I am not sure that the day will come when I fully embrace it.

Another second passes. With a glance at my watch, I realize that I am going to be late. With that, I stand up straighter and walk into another day.

*\*Names and details have been changed and altered to preserve anonymity.*

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By Morgan Brinker