

to apu with
to apu, with love
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Shortly after arriving in New York in 1971 from Hyderabad, India, I remember skipping ecstatically behind my father as he carried a naked, used, black-and-white Zenith television through the streets of Astoria, Queens. Since he hadn't learned to drive yet, there was no candy-apple-red Impala to transport the beast. And we couldn't afford to take a taxi—a rickshaw, certainly, but not a taxi. So my father crouched into an Atlaslike stance, and up went the TV onto his shoulders.

“Can you see?” my mother asked him nervously. “Careful, it’s wet over there. Are you breathing?”

Her voice faded as I became lost in the appliance teetering above me. Soon, this innocuous gray box would become my savior in a new country where I had no grandfather to tell me stories, no rickshaw drivers to take me for rides, no evening walks with my mother and sister to pluck jasmine blossoms for our hair.

It didn't matter that the channel featuring *The Wonderful World of Disney* was a mess of lines and squiggles. At four years of age, I sat with my ear to the speaker, using the TV like a giant radio and listening raptly to the magic dust spilling from Tinkerbell's wand. When I think about it now, I know it was a blessing in disguise that I had to fashion my own images of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty.

One day, after a healthy dose of that wascally wabbit, I discovered that NBC was coming in loud and *clear*. Finally, I could put pictures to words! Little did I know that fairy skin was a smooth and hairless alabaster—or that fairy hair was blond and flowing.

And so marked the start of my re-education.

During the year's wait to enroll in nursery school, I sat glued to the TV set, a bowl of Spaghetti-Os in hand, and absorbed the world inside the tube. By day, I was bombarded with pitches for Barbies in evening gowns and townhouses and for giant doll heads on which I could smear Avon pinks and blues. By night, my one-eyed doll Judy and I slept in between my parents, my head reeling with wishes that my sister and brother would soon come live with us and that I could play on *Romper Room*.

Well, one of those wishes came true when my siblings joined us in New York a couple years later. I welcomed their companionship, which I had sorely missed. My sister and brother, who are seven and six years my elder, respectively, were flung into the turbulence of an alien culture rather suddenly, since they had to start school as soon as they arrived.

While whisking them off to the local Salvation Army for school clothes, my mother and I bestowed bits of American culture. We taught them English (according to Bugs Bunny) and how to ride the subway (never get on the train going into Manhattan) and which foods were “safe” to eat (pizza and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches). What we couldn't quite impart to them was the scoop on American style.

My mother, who had always been a step ahead of the Hyderabad fashion world, was still contemplating whether the ruffles on a pair of American-made panties went in the front or the back. In India, we all had our clothes custom-tailored to suit my mother's tastes. In Astoria, thrift stores became our fabric shops and my mother, the family tailor.

Silently, we were all going through some kind of transformation, which we faced with a mixture of resistance and naive enthusiasm. While my parents struggled to support us, my sister and brother were trying to fit in at Junior High School 141 and I was wending my way through Public School 122. At first, there were the usual complaints of not having many friends or not receiving any Valentine's Day cards. But by kindergarten's end, I started to feel a visible separation between myself and the rest of the children. Through the third grade, I complained that I never looked like the other kids, that my mother didn't know how to dress me, that my hair was ugly. My mother never denied her cluelessness about kindergarten couture. However, what she absolutely couldn't understand was my fervent hatred for what she saw as a thick head of beautiful, satiny black hair.

In India, she had massaged oil into my scalp and plaited my hair into two ribboned loops. That practice continued even though we were on another continent.

"But no one in school puts oil in their hair," I would argue.

"That's because they don't have such thick black hair like yours," she would reply. "Don't you want it to grow longer and more beautiful?"

Longer? It was quickly approaching my ass; pretty soon, I'd be able to sit on it. Although there was a healthy mix of ethnicities at P.S. 122, I was the only Indian kid going there at the time. No one else's mother wore a *sari* to pick them up from school.

Wasn't she listening to me? I wanted hair with springy waves. I wanted Dippity-Do curls and bangs, and that cropped, tousled look. Anything but straight, black, boring hair.

My mother finally succumbed to my miserable whining and cut my hair into a shoulder-length *That Girl* flip. Unfortunately, this only fueled my pining to meet Hollywood's narrow definition of beauty. The truth was, there was no going back until the demon seed planted by the Breck Girl had played itself out in my beating heart.

As I stood poised with a hammer and chisel, ready to crack the dark brown stone and unearth the more beautiful American me sculpted in glowing white marble, my mother stood vehemently in the way. I couldn't fully comprehend why her ideals of beauty didn't match up with society's. At the time, I felt her insistence that I keep my hair long and avoid the sun was ridiculous—more absurd than my fantasies of waking up white and blonde.

Still, somewhere beyond our many battles over hair, a new seed was planted. I was able to grasp that by eschewing my heritage, I would not be losing something precious, but giving it away. And what was that something—that *it*? That was the question.

So, I started growing my hair again.

The fourth grade was one of my most pleasant school years, mostly because of my teacher Mrs. Rodvien. She was a wonderfully alert and caring woman who nurtured her students' strengths. She picked up on my writing interest and enticed me to include a poem with each of my reports. No one else had to write a poem about Spain or the Middle Ages, but I did so anyway. I was rewarded with a glimpse beyond the physical into the intriguing beauty that lay within me.

Perhaps that precious experience gave me strength to face the times ahead—the changes that menstruation would bring by the fifth grade. Along with this rite of passage arrived hormonal imbalances

and a disinterest that shifted my priorities from playing basketball with the boys to gawking at them from the sidelines. I stepped back and looked into the mirror, wondering what the hell was going on with my body.

Actually, I was excited about getting my period and growing breasts, because it proved that there was nothing wrong with me—that everything was going according to plan. Or so I thought. But then my true hair problems began. No, not with the hair on my head, though my mother still insisted on parting it down the middle and tightly plaiting it into two braids. The problem was the hair growing—with more ferocity every day—all over my fifth-grade body. It wasn't so much the sprouting of pubic and underarm hair that concerned me. It was all the *other* hairs rearing their ugly heads—between my eyebrows, above my upper lip, around my jawline, down my neck, around my new breasts, down my front to my navel, over my arms and knuckles, right down my legs to my toes. I didn't recall ever seeing a woman shaving her face and “taking it all off” on that Noxema commercial. None of the other girls at school appeared to be walking carpets.

It wasn't long before a bully picked up on my insecurities and dubbed me an inhabitant of the Planet of the Apes. When I complained to my mother and my sister, they said not to worry about it and to concentrate on getting good grades.

“Did you know that when you were born, your head was already covered with hair?” my mother said proudly. “It's perfectly natural. Your hair shows up more because it's black, that's all.”

“So, what you're telling me is this is some kind of birth defect?” I asked with terror.

“No, Nana, you have good genes,” she said with a laugh.

That didn't help. Neither did Marcia bonking her nose with a football or Jan's hatred of her freckles; Tabitha's spells or Jeannie's

magic; not even Mr. Softie bomb pops.

So what if my mother, a doctor, was telling me I was healthy? The rest of the world was telling me otherwise. I had to take action.

While doing my homework in front of the Sony Trinitron (my father had traded in the black-and-white Zenith), I took my cue from a Nair commercial. Happily singing, “Who wears short shorts,” I slathered the stinky goop on my arms. When my skin started burning, I panicked and quickly washed it clean. After toweling off, I gaped in horror at my arms, which were all patchy. I grabbed a Bic razor and shaved the skin.

My peace, however, was short-lived.

In the lunch line the next day, Susan screamed after brushing past me. “Eww! What happened to your arms—they're prickly!”

Everyone turned and stared. I wanted to crawl under the table. I wanted to grab that blond cheerleader ponytail, wrap it twice around her neck and yank. I wanted to choke the last drop of sky from her heavily-lined eyes. But I didn't say or do anything. For the next few weeks, I just wore a hooded zip-up sweatshirt to school.

Despite my mother's predictions, my arm hair grew in much thinner than before. I was thankful for that, but was still quite disconcerted about my facial hair. I couldn't very well cover it up. Would it ever stop growing? Would it vanish one day as mysteriously as it had appeared?

I became distracted from my hair problems when my parents announced we were moving to Long Island. I left the warmer, melting-pot ambiance of Astoria and was thrust into the cold, suburban homogeneity of green lawns and swimming pools. My parents were on their way to fulfilling the American Dream, and who was I to question it?

So I bucked up. I tried to ignore that people's jaws dropped when I walked into the lunch room, that I was the darkest kid in my

junior high school, that they told me I talked funny, that all eyes were on me.

Hanging up my street-smart, blue-and-gold Pumas, I tried to get excited about the latest Sassoon and Jordache jeans. I tried to fit in, but how could I with all that hair? I was wearing it down now, pinned up at the sides with Goody barrettes. The long locks fanning out behind me served to draw some attention away from my facial hair, but I still wasn't happy.

This time, I turned to my college-bound sister and Jolene Bleach. Naturally, the bleached facial hair provided an interesting contrast against my chestnut skin. My new vanishing act was particularly noticeable when the sun hit my face during a game of field hockey.

"Hey, you got blond hair on your face. It's so weird!"

"Big deal," I responded coolly, stalling for an ample retort. "What would you know about it? I got a cousin with blue eyes."

I guess some of the girls and boys at my junior high honestly believed that Indians had jet-black hair on their heads and golden hair on their faces, and that some of us even had blue eyes. More stupid questions and more stupid answers were to follow.

And so began the re-education of my fellow students.

I should have been happy to get them off my back, but my explanations only sufficed to buy me time. Through high school, I focused most of my energy on SATs rather than dating, but I silently floundered to make sense of those much sought-after adjectives: beautiful, gorgeous, sexy, hot.

New York University and the death of my father dumped me into the abyss of an identity crisis. Soon, I was attempting to eradicate societal norms and expectations by cutting my long tresses into a short buzz and donning asexual clothing. Enraged by all the lies I had been

radiated with since I stepped on American soil, I spurned fashion, nutrition, television, medication, transportation and mechanization. I delved into an underground world of the non-glamorous, the non-plastic and that hyper-reality New York City is known for.

As I moved past the anger and on to resolution, I toyed with formulas inspired by college Zen courses: Education + Faith + Truth = Beauty. I committed myself to my writing and it propelled me into a deeper search for the purpose of my existence. I realized that with the wink of an eye, we could render ourselves blind or restore our vision. It was as easy as clicking off the television—not just the ones in our living rooms, but the ones droning in our heads. The '70s had brought us Nair; the '80s, electrolysis; and the '90s the "miracles" of laser technology. The one constant has been that droning from television and print advertising—and eventually our own heads—a droning that makes us feel thirsty, hungry and in dire need of looking like "the Other," whatever or whomever that might be. So we continue to shave, bleach and dye our way toward an ideal.

At a local hangout, a female bartender wears a baseball cap etched in glitter with the words "Sexy M.F." *Why not sexy M.F.A.?* I muse. My chuckle is cut short when I spy the glint of something on her forehead. It's a sparkling *bottu* perched on her Third Eye. The same symbol of Hindu faith that propels bigoted groups like the Dot-Busters to commit hate crimes against Indians? The same little thing that made me cringe whenever people stared and pointed at my mother in a mall? It's hard to believe the sacred *bottu* is flaunted by goddess wannabes these days. Wearing crucifixes was popularized by rock musicians, and now it's Hinduism's turn, I suppose. Sipping a club soda, I consider if it's a positive or negative thing that the *yarmulke* hasn't been honored so.

With 1997 marking India's fiftieth year of independence from Britain, I have to wonder if all the hype further exoticized Indians, or if it pulled us from obscurity and pinned us under a small cultural limelight? After all, it was also the year that Mother Theresa's funeral was televised; the year that Arundhati Roy, the author of the Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*, was lionized in the media; the year that Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* put a spin on Indian domesticity; and the year that the ancient art of *mehndi* was translated explosively into temporary tattoos for the fashionably enlightened and the culturally fashioned. Is America caught in the full-blown phase of exoticizing Indian people, or is it in the next phase of re-exoticizing them? And if so, when will the deconstruction of this stupidity begin?

On that same Sony Trinitron from my Astoria days, I watch Apu (the only regular cast member of Indian origin on a prime-time sitcom) have an arranged marriage in Springfield on *The Simpsons*, and *Seinfeld's* Elaine (wrapped in a *sari* and sporting a pierced nose and jasmine flowers in her hair) attend a love marriage in India. Over the next week, the episodes pop up in conversations with people, and I laugh.

These days, I meet people who tell me how much they love my skin and hair, which, by the way, is once again long. "You have such a nice complexion," they say. "Aren't you glad you don't have to lie out on the beach? You're so lucky. I'm *sooo* jealous."

My partner, like most people I've met in my post-college world, doesn't find the hair covering my body out of the ordinary. I suppose this has every bit to do with the fact that I don't either anymore.

Instead, he compares three white hairs streaking the black around my temples to comets in a night sky.

"Do you see them?" he asks.

"I see constellations on your shoulder," I reply, stroking my index

finger across his freckles and moles.

"Oh, I have old Jew skin," he mumbles.

"I love your skin," I say.

"Here they are," he says, as he touches my forehead. "Beautiful."

"Yes," I say as I kiss his shoulder.