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The Picket Fence

“Why do you have hair on your lip?” It was an innocent question, but little third-grade-me was still taken aback. The question trumpeted from my friend Ava’s lips during a game of kickball. I didn’t know what to say, so I panicked and said, “I was a pirate for Halloween and I couldn’t get all the fake mustache off.” Obviously, I had not yet mastered the art of lying. Not being able to comprehend the absurdity of my response, Ava squealed with laughter and I tried my best to force a laugh back. I don’t remember why I lied. All I remember was that I knew that girls weren’t supposed to have hair. This was the first instance in which I found out I was different from the other kids in my small, Catholic private school. That night, I came home feeling strangely uncomfortable, so my mother asked me what happened and I told her. To comfort me, she unveiled a small electric razor, telling me not to worry about Ava’s brash comment. As the years passed, I got more comments on my appearance, so by the end of elementary school I was shaving, plucking my eyebrows, and rubbing off arm hair. It was through all these moments and others like them, that I started my pilgrimage towards the rejection and finally the acceptance of my culture

My parents blessed me with a fairytale childhood. My dad gardened while my mom built furniture, and both of them cooked. I was allowed to play

Shukla 2

with whichever type of toy I wanted, and that often ended up in a mix of Polly Pockets and Hot Wheels. We ate a variety of cuisines and lived a fairly Westernized life. Of course there were slight cultural differences, but I didn't give them a second thought. I was blissfully unaware of anything along the lines of gender roles or race. Then came school. My classmates quickly taught me to conceal everything that made me Un-American. Unlike them. When I was a freshman, a friend once picked up my phone when "Papa" called and then proceeded to laugh at his accent. I was furious and proceeded to yell at my friend, but from that day I switched from calling my parents "Mama" and "Papa" to "Mom" and "Dad". I rejected any form of Indian food and insisted that I had a sandwich for lunch like everyone else. But no matter how I tried to warp my insides, I could not change my outsides. After reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, I realized that, I too, "longed to be white." I wanted a nuclear family in a quiet suburb, where neighbors would wave across picket fences. I would have done anything to trade in my brown eyes for the crystal blue eyes everyone said were so pretty.

My experiences throughout my education did not help to dissuade these desires, either. One day in middle school, my friends and I made the grave mistake of sitting near some eighth graders. One particularly annoying boy kept poking me, saying "Hey, Ishana! That's your name, I know it. It's on your

lunchbox! What's your middle name?" It was at this last remark when his friend snickered and said, "I bet it's Muhammad." I just stayed silent and looked down, praying for lunch to end. As the years passed, I became no stranger to the insult "terrorist." It didn't matter that I'm Indian, since I have found that racists are

Shukla 3

never usually geography buffs. Ironically, after days like that, I'd listen to recording of Hindi lullabies like my dad used to sing to me. In the quiet stillness of my bedroom, they were the only part of my culture I allowed myself to find comfort in.

When I entered high school, I was as whitewashed as that picket fence that I longed to have. I was immersed in a society of white affluence, and as a middle-class brown girl, I did all I could to keep up. Not only that, I was rewarded for the rejection of my culture. I saw those much braver than I who had refused to relinquish their culture, but they were picked off and selected as easy targets for ridicule. Students with stronger accents were labeled as "gang-members" or "fresh off the boat", and subsequently ostracized. Their accent had inadvertently morphed them into a stereotype in the public eye, and with that stereotype would follow ridicule and racist jokes. Excluding them further, other students of their same race would do anything to distance themselves from the "stereotypes", fearing mockery themselves.

I foolishly thought that adults would have the dignity not to discriminate against children, but I was wrong. My choir director, Mr. Rose, taught me this lesson. After being a student with him for four years and spending more than 10

hours a week outside of class, he still didn't know my name. He constantly confused me with the other brown-skinned girl, even though we looked nothing alike. In his mind, we were interchangeable. He even jokingly asked her if he could call her "Betty", because he didn't want to make the effort to say her name. I was always perplexed how he could pronounce "Andrionova" "Whitacre" and "Abassi" perfectly, but had trouble with anyone's name who did not physically

Shukla 4

look white. He had quite a racist reputation, but he always shot back the prepared response, "My best friend is black!" He would say nothing about how solos would never go to the students of color, or how he would mock "Maslms" (his was of saying Muslims), or how he would yell at the Asian kids to "Get onstage and stop eating fortune cookies". We would all laugh it off, for that was our only weapon. If we could not speak out against him, we could at least turn him into a joke. We didn't realize that we were only hurting ourselves by lessening the seriousness of the situation.

At that point in my life, internalized oppression had sunk into my skin and circulated through my veins. Reza defines internalized oppression as, "the oppressed person [learning] to re-enact or replicate the oppression that has been perpetuated on them." I was docile, quiet, and complacent. I no longer spoke out in class and if I had an opinion, I would keep it to myself. I started to chide myself for "blowing things out of proportion" whenever I felt like something racist was said. I needed to be less sensitive. After all, so many other people were worse off than me, right? I went to a high-performing academic

school, I always had food security, and I never had to bike or take the bus. Who was *I* to claim oppression? With my head bowed and a constant stream of apologies flowing out of my mouth, I became exactly what they wanted me to be: my oppressors had won. Outwardly, I was seen as “humble.” It was not until recently that it dawned on me: this was not humility, but rather the feeling of being unworthy of any accomplishments. Unworthy of deserving praise. Unworthy of being proud.

A change started to happen in me during senior year. My dad started driving me to school every morning, and he would tell me stories of his

Shukla 5

childhood. He’d tell me stories of flying kites, of running to the candy vendor with his friends, of celebrating festivals and of building clay statues as tall as the sky. I was mesmerized and I always wanted to hear more. Slowly, during these car rides I realized, like many others, that I “had to take my identity into my own hands” (Chan, 5). I started researching my background a little more, and wanted to go to the Hindu temple with my dad. I now longed to construct a connection between my two cultures: the one I had grown up in and the newfound Indian one I craved. I came upon a sudden realization, best put into words by award-winning spoken word poet and author Shane Koyczan: “The only reason they think they’re beautiful is the same reason they think you’re not.” I tried to talk about my cultural crisis with my sole Indian friend, but she scoffed at me. I could shop and laugh with her, but I could not partake in our shared culture because I was not “Indian enough”. Was this my penance for throwing away my ethnic identity so many years ago? Not only would I “never be 100 percent

American”, I would not be accepted by the other side either (Huynh, 73). Forever to be rejected by Americans for being too Indian, and by Indians for being too American.

The final step of my cultural realization occurred when I came to the University of Santa Cruz. Of course, I had heard rumors of the “all-accepting” residents and staff, but I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind. After all, I had considered my last school to be fairly opened minded, so how different could this one be? Little did I know that the University of Santa Cruz would awaken something within me that I had not felt in a long time: pride. The juxtaposition of these two worlds struck me during a Welcome –Week performance. An Indian performer pranced onstage, shouting and contorting her

Shukla 6

body to simulate traditional Indian dances and songs. I immediately cringed and felt a wave of second-hand embarrassment wash over me. I glanced to my right and expected to find the row of students next to me bursting with laughter. But I was wrong. Every single person was engaged and interested, and not one person was laughing. My eyes suddenly welled up with tears. I couldn’t explain why I was crying, so I just sat back and watched the rest of her performance. It’s only now that I realize why I was moved: that was the first time I had experienced true acceptance. After years conditioning myself to hate a core part of my being, I saw that I didn’t need to hide it anymore. In fact, dare I say it, I could embrace the Indian side of me.

I know I am not the only person who has gone through this process. So many others desperately try to reach through the past and grasp at the culture

that they previously abandoned. They grew up floating between two realities: never knowing which one to root themselves in. The only difference is that now I can stand poised and feel strong enough to say that I was wronged in my past. I was *not* overreacting to the racism I experienced, and it proves society's racial lens is distorted if a child can start feeling self-conscious at *nine*. No one wants to talk about race, and consequently many children of color cannot see the damage that it does to them until they escape that toxic environment, if they can at all. To use the words of American author and producer David So, "that label that you wear on your chest as a nametag should be worn on top of your head as a crown." I don't want to live in a colorblind world. I want to live in a world where people see my brown skin and consider it equally as beautiful. I no longer bow my head in submission and acceptance. I will stop apologizing for my mere existence. Now, I rise with anger at everything that was once withheld from me. I

Shukla 7

can now tear apart the picket fence that I so longed for and start building a bridge to my forgotten identity in its place.

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