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In Defense of Body Hair

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In Defense of Body Hair

Pulling at the hair on her arms, she, my young mother, pictures an ape, the usually dark-haired animal that screams of aggression and primal male dominance. The hair on her body is dark, and she is resentful of her father's thick brown hair that looks almost identical to hers. She wishes to be blond, to be light like her mother. She wishes to be more of a feminine presence in her own body.

Grabbing the razor, she locks the bathroom door behind her. The white shaving cream makes a loud *swooooosshhh* sound as she spreads it across her arms, hiding the nest of hair that condemned her to long-sleeved shirts in the middle of July. She examines the blade, touches it with her fingertips to feel the sharpness of her decision. She scrapes a line across her forearm, watching the shaving cream dissipate into her pores. The smooth nakedness that is left over spreads a smile across her face. She continues to pull hair from her skin, planning to shave every portion of herself that feels unnatural, unconventional. She uses most of the shaving cream can, hiding it at the bottom of the recycling bin so her mother won't find out that she's grown up, more of a woman than she was an hour ago.

Walking into my mother's room, I can smell the chemicals permeating the air. She's sitting upright in her bed, her arms covered in a white globbed substance that looks sticky and thick. Usually she keeps the door closed this close to my bedtime, but tonight she is open, welcoming. At eleven years old, this

smell is familiar to me. At least twice a month, my mother shuts her door, and the upstairs of our small house suddenly smells like a sterile doctor's office.

"Mom, what is that stuff?" I ask, stepping closer to examine her arms. In the light, I can see a line of white across her upper lip, too.

"Meg, don't ever shave your arms. The hair only grows back darker." She says this carefully so as to not disturb her upper lip.

She tells me the story of shaving her arms as a young girl, hoping to get rid of any trace of unattractive body hair. She tells me she had the prettiest arms for about three days, then all of the hair grew back in thicker, darker than before. I reach for the box sitting on her bedside table, reading the word *bleach* next to a woman caressing tanned, toned legs with a wide smile on her face.

"I want you to come to me when you feel like you need to shave, okay? I need to teach you how to properly use a razor so you don't hurt yourself."

I stare at her, trying to find any semblance of my mother; in this moment, she looks like a cartoon version of her usually-put-together self. This kind of vulnerability is new, somewhat uncomfortable for me.

"Yeah, Mom, I will."

My mother lives in cinched waists and high-heeled boots. Her color-coded closet reflects the rigidity of her style and stylistic means. Black and navy blue never clash, and she only wears jeans on Fridays. Her curling iron has lived in the same spot on her dresser top since I was born, right next to her boxes of silver jewelry and oddly shaped perfume bottles. She always wears pantyhose in the winter, and makes sure her body is smooth at all costs.

The first time I shave, I don't tell my mother. I drag a semi-damp razor across virgin pores, ripping up follicles and the first layer of my skin. I see the blood accumulating in thick dark lines on my shins and rush to the kitchen for a paper towel. I hear the sound of my mother's heels against the hard wood as I try to mop up blood from the kitchen floor. We see each other; then she sees the mess that is my lower half.

"What in God's name are you doing?" she asks, dropping her leather purse to the floor. She rushes me back to the bathroom, bloody paper towel in hand. She sees the razor balanced on the bathroom sink, and lets out a heavy sigh.

"Why didn't you wait until I got home to do this?" she asks, pulling rubbing alcohol from the cabinet above our heads.

The feeling of rubbing alcohol on open wounds felt less uncomfortable than the conversation we had with the bathroom door closed. My mother asks me why I didn't want her involved with my personal life, why I wanted to start shaving, if I was thinking about sex, and if that's why I wanted my body to be naked. I couldn't tell her that I didn't want to grow up with my mother there.

"I just thought I could do it on my own," I tell her, watching the razor burn form on my legs before my eyes. Everything burned: the guilt, the skin, my body against the cold bathroom floor. My mother took the razor and showed me how to shave properly. She said even strokes, don't dig in too deep, and always use shaving cream or soap. She taught me to shave all the way up the leg, to never be lazy when it comes to hair management.

"No man wants to see the hair that you missed," she says, standing up and adjusting her long black skirt. I remember studying her in that moment; the way she looked at herself in the mirror, smacking her lipsticked mouth together as she left the room. I put Band-Aids on my shins and knees, stood up, and examined myself, too. I was a mess in comparison.

My mother and I have grown into separate but similar women. We pour red wine at 5:00 p.m. and talk about the local news cycle, moving through nights in a haze of anxiety about the next day ahead. We wear high-heeled boots together and walk in a hurried synchronicity that can move the wind. We are constantly trying to reinvent ourselves out of fear of becoming stagnant, dull. We say we're going to see each other more, but we hardly ever do. Like my mother, I wear cinched waists and keep silver jewelry in boxes.

I stopped shaving my body a year ago. My hair has grown into braids that keep me warm and liberated. My razors disintegrated into rust in my shower, and my hair grew in darker than ever. I stopped believing in the notion that to be feminine is to live within a body that needs to be trimmed and toned, no trace of any organic growth on the body—inside or out.

"Are you going out like that?" my mother asked me the last time I was home. Looking at myself in the mirror, I noticed nothing wrong with my appearance.

"What, is it the skirt?" I asked, clutching the fabric that hugged my thighs in the way my mother told me it should.

She walked into the bathroom and grabbed my wrist. Tugging my arm to the sky, she looked at my armpit hair and stared back at me in the mirror. I felt my face flush as I told her that I would not be shaving just to go out in public.

"You're going to give your grandmother a heart attack the next time you see her if you're not wearing sleeves," she says, checking her makeup while she has the mirror at her disposal.

I don't know how to tell my mother that accepting body hair is a freedom I wish she could experience. Instead of feeling like being a woman is a chore,

my choice to celebrate my body negates all my mother's teachings of the prim and proper.

In this moment, I wonder if she is embarrassed by me, if I have become the things that she feared I would: unclean, unladylike, unprofessional. I wonder who she truly wants me to be, who she hopes I will grow up to be. I wonder if I am living up to her expectations as a woman and a daughter. I look at her and search for an essence of myself in her face. I have her blue eyes, her full lips, her smile lines. Other than those physical attributes, I am mostly my own.

I grab her hand, her long fingernails grazing my palm. I want her to know that I am okay with who I am, even if she is not.

"I'll be home later, Mom. Keep the light on for me."