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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

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THE LIFE OF A COCONUT



THE VERNAL POOL

ISSUE TWO, FALL 2015

The Life of a Coconut

1.

When I was in first grade, I thought my last name had been spelled wrong.

My name just didn't feel right. Too long, too many letters, too hard to pronounce. Teachers looked at it like it was a puzzle. And because names define people,

I felt like the enigma.

2.

"Gimme a free slurpee!"

a boy in my class yelled

as I walked past him.

I was seven or eight.

True, my father and I

went to 7-Eleven

almost every week

after school, and the

cashier appreciated
my dad speaking in
the language of lions.
Yes, he would give us
free things.
Mostly bags of chips
close to expiration.
Never free slurpees;
they were only discounted.

3.

“What accent do your parents have?”

a girl in my class asked me one day.

I stared at her.

“My parents don’t have an accent.”

I was ten.

“Yes they do.”

That night, I listened:

To my mom chatter on the phone as she cooked curry in
the kitchen.

To my dad's running commentary on the Laker's game.

That was an accent?

I had thought it was something all adults had.

After all, many of my classmates had parents
with accented voices as well.

But then I recalled, years before

when we went to Puerto Rico and St. Martin
on vacation.

Someone asked my parents where they were from.

Sri Lanka was on the tips of their tongues, yet

I came forward,

gesturing between my brother and me,

"They're Sri Lankan, but we're American."

4.

When I go out, strangers
speak Spanish to me.

It's not their fault.

Where I live,
people assume anyone with
tan skin,
brown eyes,
dark hair,
is Latino.

“Ignorant,” my dad might say,
and my mom might scrunch her face.

Anyone too dark
is African-American.

Just as guests assume
my father is
when he takes their bags as a bellman.

Anyone too light
is Filipino.

Which is what people think
my mother is
like many of her fellow office workers.

Where I live,
you fall into one of
these three categories
when you aren't white.

Call myself Indian,
people think Native American.
Call myself Asian,
people think East, not South.

I try to just flat out say
I'm Sri Lankan, yet
I get mixed reviews:
There is the small, small
group who knows and nods.
There is the majority, who
look confused and ask.

Then there was the one person,
who said, “You’re shitting me,
is that a land like Narnia?”

I might as well belong to
a fictional land.

5.

“Sri Lanka? I’ve never heard of it. An island below India? That’s
so exotic!”

What does exotic mean?

Lush rainforests, tropical temperature, snake charmers, and
elephants roaming?

Or does it mean a group of people so small and insignificant to
you that you can provide no other adjective than a dismissive,
back-handed compliment you don’t really understand.

Is that exotic?

6.

I remember looking up to Victoria's Secret models as the epitome of American beauty. As a young girl I'd stare at the banners of perfect, scantily clad women as my mom pulled me by the hand through the bustle of the mall to get her shopping done.

When I finally got old enough to shop there myself, I learned something while buying my first set of bras from Victoria's Secret Pink. Looking at the white little tag near the fastener, I read small, pink script which said, "Made in Sri Lanka."

At first I felt so proud. "The country of my ancestors, my heritage, has a hand in creating one of the biggest ideals in America! Maybe I'm closer to being an ideal myself than I think!" But when I realized that the small, pink print that says "Made in Sri Lanka" is the only real representation Sri Lanka had with Victoria's Secret, I began to look at their thin, fair models with scorn.

The fair complexion ideal which persists around the world is something I'm only starting to fully understand now. But that doesn't mean that it didn't affect me earlier.

I'm attracted to white guys. It's no wonder why.

I used to think it was it because I was raised in America. Growing up, watching and reading love stories with handsome white

heroes like Emmett Richmond and pretty white heroines like Elle Woods. Becoming enamored with the idea of a wholesome, American husband. Eyes drawn to lighter skin, lighter eyes, lighter hair.

I used to think it was genetic. Maybe I'm like my great-grandfather on my mother's side, who married a British woman, my great-grandmother, golden hair and green eyes. Perhaps I'm like my cousin on my father's side. He got married in Minnesota to his fiancé, petite and pretty with blonde hair and blue eyes.

I wonder what their kids will look like. I wonder if mine will look similar. Mixed kids more often than not tend to be gorgeous. A small part of me hopes that the British genes buried deep in my DNA might show through, so my kids will look even whiter than just half. I wonder what my parents would think if they knew.

Mostly I wonder what my father will think, when he inevitably walks me down the aisle, and doesn't see a Sri Lankan man waiting for me by the altar.