

# Letting My Hair Down

*A Memoir*

by

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The phrase “stiff upper lip” did not apply to me as much as “hairy upper lip” did. All my life, I have been top-notch in the hair department, starting from the ebony ringlets that framed my brown cherub-like baby face, to the patches of soft tuft that started appearing underneath my armpits before any of my peers to signal oncoming womanhood. Some girls get a visit from Aunt Flo first, others are the first to grow into their training bras. I was the first to show any relation to Bigfoot. Adolescence has a real sick sense of humor. French women seem to make everything appear fashionable, (red lipstick, chignons, croissants, and so on) but even they would have trouble disagreeing with the similarities between unshaved armpits and an upside down Troll doll. I can imagine an old French lady scolding me, “My dear, you should not carry your kittens like that. Oh my god, my mistake.”

My body hair grew thick and unwavering, resolute in its mission to spread out across and over territories much like the British Empire. Sadly, my body was no Gandhi, able to fend off the hair’s advances with non-violent protests. I have long eyelashes which is a blessing because it saves money on mascara and eyelash extensions and so on, but since there is a flip side to every dastardly coin, I also have a faint mustache which means people often mistake me for an effeminate member of a young Italian boyband. I’m the shy one.

It would be quite all right if I stayed at home and never had to interact with people, but unfortunately not everyone can live the privileged life of a hermit. Soon, my hairy countenance was exposed to the cruelties of adolescence: to the pitying smirks of genetically blessed teenage girls, and to the rowdy, back-slapping, porn-devouring gaggle of teenage boys in high school. I was passed an anonymous note in class with the phone number of a

waxing lady, while someone presented me with a Gillette razor for my birthday because “It’s the best a man can get.” A well-meaning friend suggested I go as a Mexican mariachi player to a Halloween party because all I would need is a sombrero. Teenagers display a ferocious lack of empathy, while I displayed restraint not to visit the neighborhood barber who had set up shop underneath a flowering banyan tree, ask for a clean shave, and call it a day.

South Asian schoolgirls have long, thick plaits swinging down on both sides of their neck; strong, jet-black hair signifying health and virility. To stay (literally) true to my roots, I vigorously applied argan, coconut and olive oil to my tresses as a young girl, alternating every week, understanding the mane’s mantle in the thorny jungle of perceived attractiveness. This had the unfortunate side effect of me leaving behind huge grease stains everywhere I went, like an oily business card. It also earned me the nickname “grease-monkey” and “lady mechanic” but I let these monikers go over my (shiny) head. I knew, back then, that beauty is power. I never got my head stuck, I could slide out of most situations, and under the scorching Lahori sun, emit the slight smell of freshly baked cookies.

Fast forward a few years later, and that source of power seemed to become a lot more difficult to achieve. Being bombarded by images of perfect, hairless bodies in magazines, movies and mannequins led to an alarming expedition to rid myself of suddenly unwanted hair. This was in contrast to the costly number of products I had already been consuming to encourage hair growth. I now had to shop on the other side of the aisle - the shameful hair removal side.

The hair growth-boosting shampoos and oils I had enjoyed browsing through featured exotic, ethnic names and enticing imagery along with the uncompromising promise of eternal beauty. Hidden Honey Treasures Shampoo with Virgin Coconut for Hair Growth; Essence of Mythic Argan Oil with White Tea Hair Recovery Mask; Whisper of Golden Moringa and Aloe Vera Hair Mist; Daily Detox with Royal Jelly and Tiger Orgasm; Soy Milk & Almonds Ultimate Blend. Wait, the last one was my smoothie order.

The hair removal products, in contrast, seemed like they were manufactured in a factory by unimaginative employees with a chronic fear of women's bodies. Ouch-Relief Numbing Wipes, Nose Wax Strips, and No-Stink Depilatory Creams. They sound less exotic and more like something your grandfather would use to keep the inevitable at bay.

I soon encountered a new type of pain-the pain of succumbing to a beauty ideal that I had no say in. I shaved the hairy cardigan on my arms, tweezed the mini-forest above my eyes, and waxed the hell out of my sensitive upper lip. This is after I tried bleach which just leaves you with a ridiculous blonde moustache, a fun facial addition which should succeed in making you feel even more self-conscious as a dark-skinned woman than you do already in a world which still equates fair skin with beauty. How is a blonde mustache better than a dark one? I am happy to end the debate once and for all: blondes do *not* have more fun. I even attempted to wax my legs, but no one should voluntarily suffer through that much pain unless it is sexual in nature and includes a contract signed by both parties. The reason why I took it upon myself to expunge my skin clean of hair follicles is that the beauty salons here do not even try to turn you into a repeat customer. The “posh” salon

where I went to get my arms and legs waxed has its waxing rooms in the basement. Anyone who has seen a horror movie knows nothing good can come out of the basement.

Basements are where you keep your victims tied up, everybody knows that. That, or Igor; the ugly child you are not proud of. The salon lady takes you downstairs to a dingy dark room where you are given a hospital bed to lie in. The bed sheets have dubious stains on them, ochre in color in case you were wondering, and as you lie down you just have to make a mental pact with yourself to let your hygiene standards slip a little that day. Just that day. It will be worth it when you see your silky hairless legs, smooth like butter and velvety-soft like a hairless kitten's belly.

But nothing prepares you for the tub of wax that is brought out. A giant cauldron of sticky golden-brown wax with fingernails and roaches swimming in it. The butter knife they used to smear the contaminated wax on me had blood smeared on it, or worse, the remains of the sandwich they had made for lunch. The ladies forgo any notion of 'no double dipping' (it's quite all right if you do not know what that is, these ladies have no idea either) and instead display an indifferent demeanor that closely resembles that of an unimpressed madame who has seen it all before.

Rather than see if the customer is comfortable before such a painful ordeal, the ladies working at the salons I have been to seem more interested in roasting the customer's appearance. "Your skin is just a minefield of stubborn blackheads," one remarked to me as she threaded my bushy eyebrows into submission. "And you really need to learn how to contour. Your nose enters the room before you do." Am I expected to pay for this? I could

get this treatment from friends and family for free.

Is there a way out of this hair-obsessed hell, I wonder as I drive past the beauty salons responsible for the permanent scars I now have on my arms from waxing incidents gone wrong. Maybe I'll give hair removal a break for a while. What's the worst that could happen?

A week later my mother asks when I'm planning on taking my next salon appointment.

"You can't go around in public looking like that!" she gestures towards my furry arms. "Like an animal!" I want to scream at her, "I am not an animal, I'm a human being," but then I remember that the line was made famous by someone nicknamed, "The Elephant Man", so I just kept my mouth shut.

Did you know that South Asian women are more likely to wax their pubic hair, while South Asian men are more likely to feel empowered by sending unsolicited friend requests to women on Facebook?

The hordes of creams began to pile up into a tower on my vanity, next to spools of thread and bills for monthly salon appointments. Hair removal is expensive, and the mockery of life choices. You would almost think it's a profit-making enterprise based on the exploitation of women's insecurities or something.

My friends and I took to carrying tweezers in our bags for hairy emergencies. Anxiety would start knocking on the doors in my head if I did not remember to shave. The pain of

waxing became second nature. I began to anticipate it like the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay that were tortured with American songs, not knowing when Justin Bieber would start to sing again. Everyone knows that they can tell me anything because no matter how much torture I endure, I'll never crack. I won't even tell the waxing lady if it hurts anymore.

There would be piles of numbing strips littering the dustbin. I wouldn't leave the house if my waxing lady was on a holiday. I ordered not one, but two Sephora contour kits through a relative visiting from Dubai.

It is 2018 and I am watching a show on Netflix called 'Easy' which chronicles the lives of everyday people living in Chicago. Two queer female characters on the show are espousing their love of each other's unwaxed bodies; their hairy legs intertwined and in full lingering focus of the viewer, a visually strong example of a refusal to conform to unrealistic beauty standards.

Why am I only now being exposed to an alternative lifestyle, after having suffered so much at the hands of an unflinching beauty ideal? Why could I not have seen this show earlier, and its unorthodox depictions of women that are actually happy in embracing their natural bodies?

I pause the show and examine the women, static on the screen with their pixie hair cuts and septum rings. What if going au naturel just another beauty trend, like all the ones before it? Maybe it's a Millennial fad, this no-shaving business. Remember the thinly plucked eyebrows from the 90s? Or the crimped hair from the 80s? This too shall pass, much like

all the trends before it.

But then I think about why I want to needlessly and repeatedly subject myself to this superficial pain every day, week, month and year. Why have I learnt to dislike my natural hairy state so much that the slight sight of stubble makes me flinch? Surely, there is something problematic with my internalized loathing of the natural female form.

I look to Frida Kahlo, with her proud unibrow and moustache, the beautiful braided crown sitting atop her forehead, adorned with flowers and ribbons, and she says: “Nothing is absolute. Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves, everything flies and goes away.” I am pretty sure she’s either talking about our collective societal hatred of hairy women, or maybe she’s referring to the way my fur flies off the razor after a long bout of no shaving, I don’t know. What I do know is there is a new purportedly pain-free laser hair removal device on sale on Daraz.pk right now.