**How to Not Hate Your Brownness**

Take a deep breath. Things will only be scary and uncertain from now on. You’ll start kindergarten with a lick of English in your mouth. You’ll meet lots of white kids but somehow you’ll end with a girl just like you, replaced with Vietnamese instead of Bengali. You’ll be together for a long time, and she’ll learn your pain just as you’ll learn hers; wordlessly, with music class tears and stuffed animal interventions.

The food in your lunchbox will confuse the white kids at your table and when they say it smells weird and gross, you’ll lose the taste for your mother’s cooking forever. You’ll smell like your mother, of coconut and delicate saffron, scents from worlds away, a fragrance you’ll begin to hate. Oh, what you’d do to not be so wholly brown, to smell of sweet watermelon and strawberries like all the little white girls that were meant to be your peers but instead became your idols.

The things you’d do to not have your hair slicked back in a tightly braided rope down your back, oozing the smell of the unrefined coconut oil your mother bought from the Indian supermarket. You won’t eat with your hands like your grandpa raised you to, too scared of the color yellow now because of the haldi stains that’ll grip onto your fingernails like a lifeline.

You hate your brownness and you’re convinced that everyone else hated it, too. You’ll grow up, though. You’ll grow from an insecure brown girl to a wavering brown teenager. You’ll think you finally love yourself because you don’t want to be white anymore. That is until you meet him.

He says he likes Asian girls and for once, you think you might actually like your brownness, might enjoy your skin because at least he likes it.  You’ll realize soon that when he said he liked Asian girls, he didn’t mean your kind of Asian. You’ll move on because you’ve always been too strong for a boy to break your spirit, but you’ll build walls high and you’ll never let anyone into your heart that easily again.

You dislike your brownness, still. It holds the burden of an inconvenience, like a mosquito bite that won’t stop itching or mango juice that stickies your hand. You’ll commit subtle microaggressions towards yourself. You didn’t even know English as a child but now you won’t speak much Bengali, hating the way it fits awkwardly in your mouth and how desperately your parents attempted to keep it flush against your tongue. You’ll learn to cook and it’ll become one of your favorite hobbies.

You’ll learn how to make an entire Thanksgiving dinner, without so much as a glance to your grandma’s chicken curry recipe. You’ll make some money and spend it to attain the perfect smell of vanilla you so desperately wanted as a child to replace the stench of your motherland. You say you like your culture but you sit still when they’re mocking your country as a joke.

You’re very good at lying to yourself and to everyone around you. You present your sturdiness well, dressing in the riches of the salwars and sarees your aunts send to you while cringing at your father’s accent. You’ll live comfortably as an imposter to everyone up until the world shuts down and you’re left with your thoughts for a little longer than you’d wanted. Unpacking trauma that was better left alone will break you to the point where your pain becomes palpable and your mother will think you’re sick.

You remember everything and you have to reassess yourself. All this time you thought you hated your culture, without realizing you hated your skin even more. The racism was a painful burden on its own, but colorism was the invisible weight your mind wanted you to forget with such strong intent. You’ll be the brown-skinned girl in a family of light-skinned ones. When it came to beauty, there was no question that your cousins glowed and twinkled above you like angels personified. Your darkness is hard for them to swallow, they worry you’re poison with that weary skin color of yours.

You’ll grow tired and wonder if anyone could ever see past your skin, the harshness of your appearance, and see the fire lit under all those calloused layers. You aren’t a raging fire, you don’t fill people with spontaneity or adventure, you just aren’t the flamboyant type; instead, you’re a bonfire, a hearth, a fireplace--you’re a place to call home. And there will be people who will see that, trust me when I say this. That girl you met in kindergarten will stay and kindle your fire, opening the door for guests and kicking out unwelcome visitors. In your world of insecurity, she’ll assume the position of keeper of the house, as if she didn’t have her own demons to fight.

People will love you even when you can’t love yourself. They will see the way you can’t cry, the way you smile at everything, the way you hide yourself to make yourself more palatable, and they won’t look away. They won’t pretend not to see it like you’d hope they would. They will embrace you and you will finally feel that affection you’d always craved.

 The greatest lessons you learn will not be from those stories and textbooks you lugged around for the entirety of your childhood. You’ll come to realize the skin you hated with such hardheaded intent is so uniquely yours. Each fading scar and dark spot shines with stories of your past. There is something so completely yours in this heritage. Who are you to reject the history of your ancestors that cling to you like the turmeric masks your mother used to smear across your face?

This brownness that’s weaved the picture of your grandmother tending to her husband’s farm with her baby slung on her back and your mother’s skillful crushing of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and the likes to flavor her masala cha, what is there to be ashamed of? Your skin is tinged the sweet wildflower honey color with reason; not everyone is admired so diligently by the sun’s rays that it darkens with sweetness. Your brownness has always stung, always stuck out in the melting pot of a country you called home but nonetheless, it is yours. White skin is pretty to look at and easy on the eyes, but your brown skin, in its raw and full passion, says more than words ever could.

*I am unapologetically brown! I am the colors of sweet honey and cocoa unmatched! This skin is greedy for sunshine, it begs for the sun to kiss it another shade darker! It is powerful, intimidating, and hard to understand and that is its beauty! You, stunning temptress of rays of raging fire, I love you in all of your glory!*

Little brown girl, you’ve worked hard to hide yourself; it’s time to feel the sun against your brownness once again. There is no longer a reason to hate your brownness now.