

In My Skin

I blame my mother for who I am. Whole heartedly, unabashedly blame her. My father, I suppose, shares some of the responsibility for the person that I am. But I think like most little girls, my mother was my first role-model, my paragon of what the mysterious world of womanhood entailed.

From an early age, she taught me the secret rites and practices that only women know. I would watch her prepare for an evening out with my father, fascinated with the magical way she applied make-up, enthralled with her ability to put on panty-house and still make it look glamorous, and I committed each detail to memory, anxious for the moment it would be my turn. But more than teaching me how to put make up on in five minutes and make it look as though I had spent an hour in front of the mirror, my mother taught me the most valuable life lessons I have ever learned, and she taught them to me the same way she taught me most things in life: by letting the light and brilliance of her spirit dictate her actions.

Though I was born in Ontario, my parents had moved back to Georgetown, Guyana—a small country in South America—when I was a baby. Five years later, the political climate changed and my parents decided we would have more opportunities for education and a better life in Canada. Our government didn't allow us to bring our money out of the country, and distance prevented us from bringing all of our belongings. With only a fraction of our clothing as our meagre possessions, we boarded the plane to Toronto, then another to Calgary. The flight attendants gave my sister and me a puzzle and a toy airplane for being good. And I thought to myself, "I'm really going to like Canada! They give you stuff just for being yourself!"

Everything was different in Calgary. At night in Guyana, I could hardly see the sky for the stars, blue, pink, and white, that crowded against the black canvas. In Calgary, I strained to see the stars in the sky, but I didn't care because all the stars seemed to have dropped to the ground. From Spy Hill, the city spread out like a fairy land of twinkling lights. It was magic, this city. Calgary didn't sleep the way that Georgetown did. It throbbed and beat, a steel and cement heart.

With our parents as our guides, Calgary wasn't a city. It was a magical

portal, where nothing was what it seemed. Houses weren't buildings of wood and stucco. They were living creatures that rose from their foundations while their families slept and wandered the darkened roads. The mountains that bordered the city were guardians, and if I was patient when I watched them, I could see them breathe.

The city would change us, my parents told us. It was different from back home and it would make us into whatever we wanted. One night as we walked home from the grocery store, my dad told us that the city had changed him into a dragon.

"It did not!" My sister and I scoffed.

"It has! Look!" And he puffed white plumes from his mouth into the frosty air.

"That's nothing! I can do that too! It's just cause it's cold!" We tripped over each other's words to prove that my dad was just fooling us.

"It's not just the clouds." My dad bent down so our faces were inches from each other. "It's this, too," and he began to flare his nostrils, like a bull about to charge. "Can you do that?"

No. Neither one of us could, but my dad was a trickster and couldn't be trusted. We turned to my mother, our compass of truth. She looked closely at my father and told him to do it again. He did, twin streams of white clouds accompanying his demonstration. My mother nodded her head and looked at us, serious as the dark night that surrounded us.

"He's a dragon. The city has changed him."

For the rest of the walk from Chinook Centre to our apartment, we eagerly tried to imitate our father, our spirits flagging until our mother made the change and became a dragon like our father. Then our efforts redoubled. Encouraged by our parents, the night filled with our endless questions about what kind of dragons we would be, if we could learn to fly as well. This city. It held endless possibilities, and I wanted to explore them all.

Calgary had more people than the entire country of Guyana, and they were nothing like me. They dressed in jeans and sweaters, business suits and cowboy

boots, and the people came in all shapes and sizes. Everyone seemed to be white, and even then, some had blond hair, some dark. When I walked into a restaurant or a store, I didn't see anyone that looked like me. It was the best adventure of my life, to be in this city that looked like it had been pulled from a fairy tale, and to be surrounded by people who spoke a different type of English than I was used to.

My older sister and I started school that fall, and my adventure went from grand to epic! My classroom in Guyana had scarred wood desks and windows that surrounded the building and were constantly open to cool down the room. The classroom in Calgary had desks with shiny green metal legs, brick walls, bright lights, and hardly any windows. It smelled of paper and freshly sharpened pencils. If it rained, the school didn't flood.

I wanted to explore everything, wanted to know everything: Mom, why are the leaves changing colour? Mom, why does the snow sparkle? Mom, when will I turn white? In my child's mind, it made sense that surrounded by pink-skinned people, I too, would one day grow to look like them. It was during my first year in Calgary that I asked the Fateful Question, the question that forever changed me, forever scarred my mother, and forever altered the landscape of the country that I called home.

My mother, my sister and I had just gotten off the bus. It was a trip downtown and I could barely contain myself. The cars drove by us, spraying waves of grey slush from the road on to the pavement, and if I closed my eyes, they sounded just like the sound of the ocean tide rolling on to the beach back home. We huddled together with the crowd of shivering people at the stop light, all of us so totally bundled in layers of clothing, multi-coloured scarves and mittens, toques and boots, hoods and coats that all I could really see of the men and women around me were the clouds of air that escaped from their mouths. As we waited for the light to change, the noise of the men stamping their feet, the voices complaining, laughing, arguing mixed with the music of the cars driving by, the life and the vibrancy of the city and its people seemed to fill me until I thought that I would explode. I wanted to know why the light was taking so long to change, how the buses knew where to

go, why some buildings were made of glass and some were not, and then I remembered the question I had meant to ask my mom, the question I forgot when her announcement of a trip downtown had obliterated all thought from my mind.

“Mom, what’s a Paki?”

Time stopped. Everything stopped. The cars made no sound; the people around me froze like upside down icicles. Even their breath stopped. And it was my mother who made the world quiet; it was she who had turned everything into a photograph. I knew this because of the light in her dark eyes.

Her eyes slid to capture mine, her head turned as an afterthought, a lack of union between her body and mind. There was a something in her, something that I had never seen before, and it stared out at me from her eyes. It was a beast, menacing with sharp claws and blood-dripping fangs, and it hid in my mother’s eyes.

“Where did you hear that?” Her voice was the same sweet, lilting voice that I knew, the voice that sung me to sleep, and chirped me awake, but the monster continued to stare at me.

“There’s a boy at school that calls us that.” I took a step back as the monster in her roared, though only I could hear it; the yellow knives of its claws reached out to me as it tried to break free from the prison of her eyes. She didn’t ask any more questions after that. Instead, she began to giggle, like only my mother can giggle, the child that she used to be always escaped and danced the invisible waves of her laugh. She took our hands in hers and began to tell jokes. Then she told us about the Devonian Gardens where, she assured us, the fish were bigger than our heads.

“Why did you tell her!” My sister reproached me later that night. She had seen the monster as well.

“I just wanted to know what it was!” I hastened to defend myself. If my mother was my first role-model, then my big sister was my second, and I hated it when she was upset with me.

“It’s a bad word! God! Why do you have to be like that?” Her words exploded in our bedroom, the shrapnel shattered the drywall and cut my flesh.

“Buy why? Why is it a bad word? What is it?” Even bleeding and wounded, I couldn’t let it go. If I was going to die, at least I wanted to know why.

“It’s us!”

And finally, my brain began to wrap around the kaleidoscope of memory. The brick wall of excitement that had surrounded me since I had stepped off the plane began to crumble and I saw the walk to school for the first time.

Suddenly, I realized why my sister forced me to walk on the outside of the sidewalk. It wasn’t just luck that the boy’s snowballs always seemed to catch her. She had purposely positioned herself to take those blows, her face a stoic mask as she turned her back to take the brunt of the icy bombs that burst against her coat and left her a sopping mess by the time we reached the doors of the school.

“I’m your sister; I’m supposed to take care of you!”

You did take care of me! I wanted to scream it at her until she stopped looking at me as though she had failed me in every respect. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t get past the pain that had etched itself on her mouth and poured from her eyes. It closed my throat and left me helpless. My curiosity had betrayed me; my endless questions had brought me no happy answers.

Without my walls to protect me, I had no defence against the arrows that began to fly toward me. I watched my sister, huddled in a defeated ball on our bed, her back slightly turned from me and deaf to my pleas for forgiveness. I felt everything that was light about me fade into a black void.

I still didn’t know what a Paki was, but based on the monster that had risen in my mother and the pain of my sister flooding the room, it wasn’t good. It was us, but remembering how my sister had defended me, how my mother had watched me, I suspected a Paki wasn’t so much us, as it was me.

I was a Paki. I was bad. Something terrible and loathsome dwelled within me, and even though I couldn’t feel it, one day it would rise, this Paki-thing, and consume me. Was it obvious to everyone but me that I was a Paki? Would my new friends one day look at me and squeal, “You’re a Paki! We can’t be friends with you!”

From the kitchen, my mother’s voice reached us and put my thoughts on

hold. Under no circumstances did we ever ignore my mother's call, but especially this time. There was a tightness in her voice, an authority in the way she called our names that said we had best get ourselves downstairs.

My sister looked at me and hissed, "This is all your fault!" She vaulted off the bed and left the room, her usual routine of waiting for me disregarded in her anger, another punishment for my big mouth.

I skulked to the kitchen, wondering if my mother, like my sister, had stopped loving me. I scaled one of the chairs and searched my mother's face, desperate to know that I hadn't lost everything. The vinyl fabric creaked as she pushed cups of tea towards me and my sister.

"Tell me everything," she demanded.

I told the story, at first looking to my sister to add bits and pieces, then when I realized that she wanted no part of the recollection, directed my comments to the liquid in my brown mug.

My mother would not be satisfied until she knew and had verified every detail. "He calls you Paki and throws snowballs at you?" She looked at my sister, who for the first time since we had sat down, actually looked at me. My sister continued to look at me, my cue that the question was mine to field.

"He just used to call us names. He and his friends started throwing the snowballs a few days later."

The blood fled from my mother's face. "How long has this been going on?"

I shrugged. I didn't know.

"A few weeks." My sister, older, wiser, and under the iron gaze of my mother, answered.

"Weeks! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you we should have told the teacher!" My sense of vindication short-lived, cut short in its prime by the glare my sister bestowed upon me, her mouth compressing into a thin line until I couldn't see it anymore.

"It was fine," my sister's jaw was set in a hard line.

"It's not fine! You're just children!"

I saw my sister's shoulders drop a little in relief; in her eyes, a yearning to believe my mother's words. My sister always took her role as Big Sister seriously. The idea that she had failed me, failed my parents, and failed her position too much for her seven-year old shoulders to carry.

"Really?" I could hear the hope trembling for life in her voice.

My mother began to cry, telling us that she was our mother, that these were the things that we should come and tell her, that we were too young to carry this burden ourselves. Then her questions came like bullets from a semi-automatic: What did he look like? How old was he? Where were the teachers? How many boys threw the snowballs?

That night, I could hear my mother and father talking. What they said, I couldn't tell, the walls too thick, their voices too low. But I could hear the anger, the sadness. I could hear their hearts break.

It grew quiet, and then I heard our door open, its hinges complaining in squeaking voices. I felt someone sit on the bed, the weight changing the mattress into a hill that my legs rolled down. I pretended to be asleep. It was late and I didn't want to be in trouble, but the person wouldn't move. Curiosity, the demon that had brought chaos into our home, forced my eyes open. I saw my father sitting beside me.

He looked older than I remembered. His mouth pulled down until it almost reached his chin. He smiled at me, but it bounced off the weariness that cloaked him and was quickly buried by a sadness that filled the room.

"Go to sleep."

"Okay."

He smiled again, and this time it managed to stay longer on his lips and face, like a butterfly alighting for a moment, it brought light back to the room and dispelled the turmoil that I was drowning in. After giving both my sister and I a kiss, he left the room.

My mother came to us the next day and told us, "Go put on your jackets."

"Where are we going?"

“We’re going to find that boy.”

My sister stopped in her tracks as though the rug had grown hands and grabbed her feet. “But we don’t know him! We don’t know his name or anything!”

“It doesn’t matter,” my mother said. “Someone knows him.”

The malevolent glare was back in my sister’s eyes as she stared down at me. “This is all your fault!” She stomped out the door.

We followed my mother all over the neighbourhood. I hung back as much as I could, terrified whenever she knocked on a door or rung a bell, that the person answering would see me and scream, “Paki!!” and slam the door in our faces. Or worse, that they would chase us off their doorstep with snowballs, that their families would join and we would be forced to run down the street, dodging a hail of snow bullets.

My mother knocked on so many doors, I’m sure her knuckles were scrapped raw. Every time a person answered, she would talk to them like they were old friends, asking about the boy as though he was a scarf she had left at their home. Door after door, one snowy step after another, she wouldn’t stop. When it got too dark to continue, we headed home, only to start again at the same point the next day.

Days later, we ended up in the home of an old lady. She had cats draped everywhere, from the banister, to the couches, to the top of her television. They posed regally, watching us, some coming to us and demanding attention. My mother began her conversation with the woman.

“What a lovely home,” she said, “so many beautiful cats.”

The old lady beamed and the conversation continued.

“Oh yes,” twittered the lady when the topic of discussion got around to the boy. “He delivers my papers.”

“Isn’t that fantastic,” my mother smiled, but I could see the monster begin to stare out of her eyes. “I need to speak to his parents. Would you please give me his number?”

“Oh, he doesn’t live with his parents. They’re divorced or something. He lives

with his grandparents.” She smiled, anxious to please. Her bright eyes darted from my mother, looking to my sister and I, worried her rare afternoon with friends might be over.

“I’ll take the grandparents’ number then,” my mother’s tone was firm but pleasant.

“It’s here somewhere.” The old lady bustled around her cramped living room, dodging her cats. Her fingers nimbly skirted her assortment of knick-knacks as she picked up pieces of paper, and checked the names on them.

“Here it is!” She waved the card and gave it to my mother as though she was giving away the Holy Grail. We stayed a little longer. The woman’s loneliness was a dark room that we had brought light to, if only for a moment. My mother would not leave until she had assured herself that the old woman had been emotionally tended.

We sped home and after putting away our coats and boots, my mother informed us that she had a telephone call to make, and she was not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency.

What seemed like hours later, she emerged from her room, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, the air of victory infused the house. I was happy because she was happy. It was my sister who thought to ask exactly what caused her happiness.

“They’re coming over after dinner tomorrow night.”

“Who?”

“The boy and his grandfather.”

The stricken look on my sister’s face perfectly mirrored my own. Here? They were coming here? Wasn’t it bad enough that we had to endure him at school? Our mother—our defender, our protector, our champion—had told him where we lived?

I looked at my sister and knew that we were thinking the same thing. Instead of a volley of snowballs to greet our walk from the field of the school to the door of the school, we were now going to be greeted with snowballs from the moment we stepped through the door of our home. My sister looked at me and said, “It’s all your fault!”

The next evening, tormented with thoughts of their imminent arrival, I couldn't concentrate on anything. To say that I was a mass of nerves would be an understatement. Every shadow at the window, every muffled sound from the hall jumped my heart through my throat. The appointed time for the boy and his grandfather to arrive came and went without their appearance. I breathed a sigh of relief and watched the tension ebb from my sister's face. We cleared the table and sat down for a game. Then the doorbell rang.

My heart stopped beating, plunged to my feet, and began to dig its way out of my body. I looked over to my sister. She sat in the chair, her head bowed, her eyes unblinking as they stared at the table. She was frozen, the lines of her body tight and hard, a statue carved by an amateur with no knowledge of how to convey movement and grace. My mother called to us. My sister slowly raised her head, her eyes glued to the table until the last moment. She looked at me and I whispered, "I know. It's all my fault."

We crept into the living room, shuffling mouse steps, hoping that if we took long enough they would give up and leave. My mother's voice told us to hurry. She waited by the front door. When we reached the middle of the living room, she said, "That's fine. Just wait there."

She opened the door and I wondered if this was what it felt like to have the Devil visit. The boy stepped through the door first, taller than my mother, his gaze concentrated on the floor. I looked nervously at his hands, checking to see if he had smuggled any snowballs into the house.

He was even bigger up close, the memory of him was scary enough, but he had never been this close to me, and it terrified me. As he walked toward us, my sister and I moved closer to each other, our bodies already touching, now pressed against each other for support. The boy's grandfather stepped into the room, ducking his head under the doorway. My sister and I groped for each other's hands. He was a giant, both in length and breadth. His hand alone was probably the size of my head.

My sister's nails dug into my skin, but I didn't care. The tighter she held, the

better I felt. If she was gripping my hand like a lifeline, she didn't have time to be mad at me. More than that, we were scared together.

The grandfather stood by my mother, her shoulder almost touching his arm, and for that I was both grateful and afraid. If he decided to do something terrible, she wouldn't have time to run. Selfishly, I was glad because it meant that he wasn't close to me. He cleared his throat and I felt both my sister and I tense for what was about to come.

"My grandson has something to say to you," he said in a voice that sounded like thunder.

The boy came even closer to us. Now I had to tilt my head up until it almost touched my back, just so I could look him in the eyes. Not that I really wanted to, the closer he came, the more frantically my heart—still somewhere by my toes—dug for escape. I thought that if my heart didn't break apart from its frantic pace, I was going to throw up from the nausea that started in my stomach and ended somewhere around my eyes.

He kept his head down and began to speak. His grandfather interrupted him, saying his name in a warning tone, then adding, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

The boy swivelled on his feet and hips, turning his upper body to look at his grandfather. At the same time, he raised his face, his features shifted from the soft look of a teenager. His skin tightened like leather on his face, as pure, concentrated anger burned in his face. I saw his hands flex into fists, his body tense. I knew this look and this posture well. It always came right before he hurled a snowball at us. I gauged the distance. It wasn't a good idea to stand too close to him, but fear kept me rooted to my spot on the gold carpet.

He hesitated at his grandfather's words, then slowly turned back to us. His head was down again, his nostrils pinched against the side of his face as he debated his next action. I held my breath.

We all held our breath.

He sank to his knees in front of us and began to mumble an apology to the carpet. Then he looked up and in front of my eyes, everything in him crumpled.

Gone was the apathy, the rebellion. What was it that prompted this change? The tone in his grandfather's voice? The fear in the eyes of myself and my sister? I don't know.

All I know was that he began to sob, great, heaving cries of pain that seemed wrung from the depths of his soul. I had never seen anyone broken in front of me before, but that's what he was. Broken. He cried and sobbed, told us how sorry he was, that he hadn't understood what he had said to us, but he understood now. "So sorry, so sorry," he continued to wail. "I didn't know. Please forgive me. Please, I'm so sorry. Please. Please. I'm so sorry."

He wasn't the only one that was crying. He wasn't the only one who sobbed. Both my sister and I cried along with him. I cried because he cried, because he was in pain and I could feel it. I cried because he said that he was sorry and that meant that he took back his words. He didn't mean them. He didn't understand them. And that meant I wasn't a Paki. I cried because the dark shadow that had followed me, the black certainty that something was wrong with me cracked under the force of his apology.

I tried to cry away all the hurt, all the pain, but the knowledge that I could be hated for the colour of my skin, that *what* I was could be judged more important than *who* I was—these realities were like weeds that took root deep within me, and I knew that for the rest of my life, I would have to prune my soul from their destructive effects.

Until we moved and left the school, the boy became our protector. He was our personal bodyguard in the hallways, our watchdog in the playground. I never worried when he was around, though I'm sure other children did: he was quick to accost anyone talking to us, verifying for himself that said person had no malicious intentions.

When I told my mother about it, she smiled and said, "People are good. They just forget that sometimes." She never brought up the subject again, except to wonder about where the boy was, and send a prayer that he had succeeded in life.

Though the choice for change ultimately lay with the boy, the opportunity for

change was brought about because of my mother. Her efforts at locating him, her courage in speaking to his grandparents, her graciousness while they were in her home, all of it culminated in a life-altering experience not just for him, but for all present.

My mother. She was my Gandalf, standing on a narrow bridge, staff in hand, looking at a fire demon and screaming, "You shall not pass!" She was my Mother Theresa, my Zena, Warrior Princess, my female Sherlock Holmes.

My mother taught me that a woman could be strong, self-sufficient, and still retain a femininity that left the observer breathless. Mercy and justice could be tempered with a manicured hand. Bad experiences in life did not have to harden a generous and loving heart. A woman could slay dragons and she could do it all, with grace and poise, and without losing the essence of who and what she was.

I blame my mother for who I am. It's all her fault that I have quotes like Helen Keller's "Life is either a glorious adventure or nothing," posted on my bathroom mirror. It is because of her I would rather cut a path through the vines and thorns than take the road, if I believe it is the right thing to do. She alone bears responsibility for the tiny wars I wage against injustice, the cheering I do for the underdog. It is my mother's fault for who I am, what I am, and for that, I will be forever grateful.