

## JESSAMYN HOPE

### *Fig Leaf*

“Well, you have hair on your vagina. That’s a real buzzkill.”

This was the response my boyfriend, Brian, gave me when some time around our three-month anniversary I got up the courage to address our disappointing sex life.

Later that night, when I called an old roommate to confirm that it was normal to have pubes, she confessed to waxing hers away whenever she had a guy in her life. The next day, the woman two cubicles down declared she’d had them permanently lasered off years ago. After my next-door neighbor responded with a face of incredulous disgust, “You’ve got a bush down there?”, I made an appointment for a lunch-time Brazilian.

Sitting in the waiting room of a day spa on Fifty-fourth Street, I looked around at the shelves of upmarket skincare products in gold-rimmed boxes and the bright fan of women’s magazines on the coffee table and wondered: if this was such a fun and sexy thing to do, why was the sunlight coming through the window muted with sadness?

My father shouted to my mother as he walked back toward his bedroom, “She has more hair than you do!” It was the spring of 1988.

Still half asleep, I looked down and saw that during the night the bottom of my nightie had gathered up at my waist and the top of my sheets had bunched down at my feet. My skin was pale and the small triangle black. My dad must’ve seen me on his way to the bathroom. Our house was smallish and on the outskirts of Montreal.

“Shhhh!” hushed my mom, but she was a Neapolitan who despite having disembarked the boat over twenty years ago still had a very different idea of quiet. Laughing like a seal being murdered, she explained, “The last thing a thirteen year-old girl wants is her dad talking about her *you know what!*”

I pulled down my pajama dress and lay still, heart smashing against my chest.

The next time I entered my bubbe's bedroom for a visit, she said, "Your father tells me you have pubic hair?"

My grandmother was lying in bed as she had been for the last fifteen years. At 5'2" tall, she weighed over three hundred pounds, despite her claims that she never ate anything. *Metabolism-shmabolism*, Dad sometimes yelled at her, *nobody left a concentration camp fat*. Though she was as obese as usual that afternoon, Bubbe was not as depressed. Last week's electroshock treatment may not have gotten her out of bed, but it did get her sitting up and wearing fuchsia lipstick and bright yellow cat-eye glasses. All winter she'd refused her glasses, claiming it was better not to see the world.

"Why so glum?" she asked as I handed her a paper cup of coffee from the downstairs deli. "Someone with such blue eyes and such a small nose has no right to be sad. What did you expect? That you'd grow up to have a knish covered with powdered sugar instead of hair? This is exciting! You're becoming a woman!"

A woman. That sounded hippy and old. I didn't want to grow up. Bubbe's arm jiggled as she reached over and spooned a heap of crushed codeine into her coffee. She kept the white powder in an ornate brass sugar dish on her night table. I sat down on the visitor's chair beside the bed. Taped to the dresser mirror was a yellowing sign: Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

My grandmother eagerly took a sip of her doped-up coffee and rested the paper cup with its imprint of her wrinkled pink lips on her thigh, her mountainous thigh that was covered with a tired blue blanket.

"I never let your *zaida* see me," she sighed. "I would only have sex under the covers. What a waste! I was beautiful. Now I have no hair. Almost none. That's what happens when you grow old. It falls out after menopause. Ach, but what do I care? The only person left to see my vagina is the coroner. But here you are, right at the beginning of the beginning. Oh my darling, darling Jess, if I could wish for you only one thing, it is this: may you have as much happiness in your life as I've had pain. I couldn't wish for you more happiness than that."

As the sturdy aesthetician in a white lab coat led me down a fluorescent-lit corridor lined with small rooms similar to those found at a gynecologist's, I heard a woman scream.

"Here," the aesthetician said in a heavy Russian accent, ushering me into one of the vestibules and handing me a paper panty. "You can put this on, but I really don't see the point." She closed the door.

I pulled off my jeans and climbed onto the cold plastic of the examination table. Lying back, naked from the waist down, I stared up at the humming florescent ceiling light. It did feel like a hospital in here. I pictured my mom waiting in little rooms like this for another doctor to come back and tell her more bad news.

The first time anyone touched my pubic hair was the summer my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

The boy, Xiu, had a large head, told jokes in a quiet voice, and thought I was the most beautiful thing to hang out in the food court. We used to make out in my bedroom while on the other side of the wall my mom was dying. As my nipples were being touched for the first time, my mother's were turning inwards. While her ovaries and uterus were being cut out, I was just starting to release eggs and bleed. While she lay in the dark, curled up in a fetal position and vomiting into a silver kidney bowl, I also lay with the lights out while Xiu unzipped my jeans and put his hand inside my cotton underwear. Sometimes he would tickle the hair at the peak of the mound, making me arch my back.

Halfway to what we called a Big O—"Jacob's Ladder" playing on the television as an alibi—I heard, "Jess! Jess! Jessamyn!" It was my mom, which was unusual because she'd been to the hospital that morning and normally didn't talk to anyone for at least two days after chemo.

Jumping to my feet, I pulled up my pants. "Coming!"

"Coming," Xiu snickered.

As I hurried toward my parents' bedroom, my mom called out from the bathroom, resting dramatically between each word, "I'm. In. Here."

She sounded so sick, which annoyed me.

“Yeah? What do you want, Mom?” I said, leaning against the bathroom door.

“I need help.”

My breath lodged in my chest. My mother never asked for help. The movie blared from the other end of the hall. Everyone else complained about bad knees and dry eyes, but Mom would walk erect with clenched teeth down the grocery store aisle even though cancer had eaten half her spine. She did whatever it took to keep up appearances. Even my dad and I had never seen her without the shoulder-length auburn wig. She slept in it.

I opened the bathroom door. My mom sat hunched and naked on the toilet, her bony shoulders curled forward, the ribs sticking out of her rounded back, bald-headed and yellow as Dijon mustard. She stared down at the blue bathmat.

What did she want from me? Standing there, I could feel the wetness from playing with Xiu.

She looked up at me with angry, wide, jaundiced eyes. “Jesus Christ! Help me up!”

I hurried over and tried to pull her up by the arms. She kept rising a little off the hard toilet seat and falling back down.

When finally we had her on her feet, I saw that not only did she not have hair on her head, but she was bald between her hollowed-out thighs. I definitely had more hair than her now. Hips, too. Could’ve hung a hat on her hipbones.

I helped her to bed. After a few weeks of my dad and the Haitian nurse, Murielle, taking turns changing her diaper and wiping her bald vagina and asshole, she died. Her last words were, “Honeydew.”

The aesthetician returned to the room, putting on latex gloves. Glancing with annoyance at my pubic region, she scolded, “You waited more than three weeks since last wax.”

“This is my first time,” I explained.

Was I repulsive? My hair too black? Too much?

“And you shaved your bikini line. What am I supposed to do?” Shaking her head, pursed lips.

This Russian—her nametag read “Inna”—wasn’t going to feign she liked her job the way an American customer service person would have.

I said, “Just do what you can, okay?”

“Okay,” Inna said, angrily dusting talc on my crotch. “But it is going to hurt.”

Without asking if it was all right, she turned on the radio, an annoying top 40 station.

An uninspired pop song filled the room as Inna smeared hot wax on my mound with an oversized wooden popsicle stick. Then she lay out a cloth strip, pressed down on it, and swiftly yanked it off.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I yelled.

By the time the front was clean, I understood why cartoon characters in pain saw stars.

The last time I’d felt this ugly was in college. To get away from my dad and his new wife, I had moved onto the campus of a small, private liberal arts college in a small and private town in the middle of the Midwest, where the first question anybody asked you was what church you went to.

Even if I hadn’t been grieving and anti-social, I would’ve waited until it was late at night, after all the other girls had showered, before carrying my plastic container of soap and shampoo from my dorm room to the shared bathroom down the hall.

Back home, I’d been a whitey. Italians were considered white, and the Jews, who purportedly all lived in giant modern houses, were considered in some ways to be whiter than white. And now, all of a sudden, among these towering blondes from small towns of German and Norwegian stock, I felt short, dark and hairy.

On the rare occasions when some other girl (probably after a sorority party) happened to also want to take a shower at two a.m.—hanging her pink towel with its picture of a fluffy white kitten, and stepping into the shower room with her small, light brown bush and long legs of flaxen fuzz—I would turn my back to her and hurriedly rinse off.

On to the labia. Inna opened my legs, and holding back my clitoris and right lip with a cold, gloved hand, she smeared hot wax on the left lip. I gripped the side of the examination table.

When the room danced with pale polka dots again, I requested a second to regroup. Inna stood back.

Once my heart calmed down, I asked, "Do I have a lot of hair? More than normal?"

I wanted to know once and for all, not how I compared to the air-brushed photos in *Swank*, but to the average woman walking down Third Avenue. And who would know better and be more frank than Inna?

"Normal," she said. "Redheads have the most. Their hair is very coarse."

"Do you do this? I mean, do you have a Brazilian?"

Inna looked at me like I belonged in Bellevue. "My husband would be horrified if I came home looking like a baby girl. Only crazy Americans do this. Take away all the hair. Brazilians don't even get Brazilians. Okay, we begin again?"

I almost corrected her and explained that actually Muslims are required to remove all their pubic hair—the Koran commands that a wife should shave before her husband enters the home—but could Islam, with its sizeable communities that mandated the covering of a woman's face and the slicing off of her clitoris, be called upon as an example of a healthy approach to sex and the body?

As Inna was coating the other lip, I remembered Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*, which had brought me to a standstill that lonely winter weekend I tried to see all of Paris. Breaking from the artistic tradition of omitting pubic hair for being too base and erotic, this close-up of an anonymous woman's bushy crotch, her legs open, and head covered by a sheet, was riveting and still able to shock hundreds of years later. Secretive, embarrassing and vital, the hair announced that here wasn't just any part of this woman's body—as opposed to Britney's crotch shot where her antiseptic vagina just looked like a continuation of her leg—this was a special spot. The most special spot, no less, *du monde*.

Inna told me to get on my knees, bend over and hold my butt cheeks apart so she could wax my asshole. As a bonus, first-time customers got them bleached for free.

Not long after that solitary time in Paris, perhaps a year after moving to Brooklyn, I met Devon when I arrived home one January night to find I'd lost my keys.

"Yes," he said, skipping onto the last step where I stood waiting and freezing in front of the door of our red brick apartment house. "I am a radioactive marshmallow."

It took me a second to understand he was referring to his bulbous, shiny silver jacket.

He was a handsome guy, but in a frattish way. He had messy light brown hair, narrow clear blue eyes, and the extra padding of someone with a moderate penchant for late-night pizza. The flashy jacket just seemed like some out-of-place panache.

I asked, "Do you live here? I can't find my key. Can I use your phone to call my roommate?"

The inside of his apartment felt like a mom-and-pop video rental store, the walls plastered with movie posters: *The King of Comedy*, *Blue Velvet*, *Metropolis*. When I sat down in a large swivel chair, Devon put down the phone he was bringing over and started spinning me around—a total stranger, didn't even know my name yet. Around and around.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

"Isn't it fun?"

Actually it was, and I laughed while the room spun.

At three in the morning, I was telling Devon about my plans to write a novel and snooping through the knickknacks on his dresser when I came across a string of game chips.

"What kind of game is NA?" I asked.

"Oh, it's a riot. Narcotics Anonymous. I play two times a day. Once in the morning, and then again in the evening. 'Cause I'm serious this time, I'm gonna *win*. And anyway, I'm not an addict really. I'm manic-depressive and I self-medicate."

"What do you self-medicate with?"

"Not *do*. Did. Alcohol *was* my drug of choice. But also cocaine. And crack."

By the time the tree outside our apartment building was blossoming white flowers, I'd already moved in, my contact solution standing

in the medicine cabinet next to his arsenal of pill bottles: Lithium, Tegretol, Neurontin, Zoloft, and Seroquel, an anti-psychotic. It was astounding how, after taking all of that crap, Devon still bounced off the walls of the world like a flashing lightning bug caught in a jar.

Time passed and together we made the transition from videocassettes to DVDs, bought cell phones, and watched the twin towers come down. After a couple of years, Devon's drug-fueled stories about destroyed relationships, lost jobs, totaled cars, fights, and overdoses seemed more and more like just stories, and he stopped needing to go to meetings every day.

The lack of restraint, total disregard for societal norms, and hyperactivity that characterized Devon in general carried into the bedroom. Together we would scroll through *thehun.com* or flip through the pages of the porn magazines he kept in his sock drawer. Though a lot of the images were of hairless vaginas, it never occurred to me that mine should look like that any more than after watching a superhero movie I would've expected myself to take up flying. Besides Devon seemed to prefer grainy 70s porn over Photoshopped gloss. It appealed to that part of him that would always like rundown bodegas better than Whole Foods, which mourned never having lived in pre-Giuliani New York. We made use of blindfolds and ropes, purple plastic toys, our imaginations and sense of humor. I hadn't had enough partners to know how rare it was for sex to be so easy.

Since I must've understood on some level that we were living on borrowed time, it's hard to say why I wasn't more prepared when I opened the apartment door one afternoon and found Devon gone and all over the walls written in black marker: I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.

Devon used to describe the joy he'd get from turning everything around him upside down as "shaking the snow globe." Unfortunately, the other tiny figure standing in the little globe's picturesque scene was me.

When I finally started dating again, I vowed to see only normal guys with steady moods and incomes. That was how I found myself with Brian, one of the many lawyers I met on JDate. Or perhaps it was Match.com? He was funnier, though, than the others, and had a full head of hair. He was also hipper, wearing jeans and Chucks on Friday



night instead of pants and loafers, and in the know when it came to all the new indie bands and Apple gadgetry. I liked that he read the latest literary fiction even if there wasn't a movie coming out, and that he would only ask me what my Plan B was if my novel didn't go anywhere every once in a while instead of all the time. Brian was a good guy. Not exceptional, but categorically good.

Unfortunately, Brian's taste in pussy was no different than the average good guy under thirty-five. It seemed during the four years that I was holed up with Devon, the landing strip had become the norm.

When it was all done and Inna had left the room for me to put my pants back on, I looked down and saw a vagina I hadn't seen since I was a little girl. The two bare lips looked so feeble. Or sick. Chemo vagina. I heard Bubbe mourning, *That's what happens when you grow old.*

How had we come to prefer the look a pussy has when it's undeveloped, sick or geriatric over the look of a ripe and ready pussy?

Back at the office where I was now a mid-level copyeditor, I could hardly concentrate. It was so sensitive and swollen down below, I was reduced to a big vagina sitting on a computer chair. Twice I went to the bathroom to feel the crazy softness. Maybe there was something to this? Only were my lips too big? Uneven? Were they normal? They seemed so *there*.

Back at my cubicle, I glanced around before Googling "labia" and consequently learning about labiaplasty, which the American Society of Plastic Surgeons declared the fastest growing trend in cosmetic surgery. Thanks, no doubt, to Internet porn and the growing popularity of Brazilian waxing. Was "female genital cosmetic surgery" so different than female genital mutilation? I banished this disturbing question from my mind—after all, I had only removed my hair, right?—and tried to concentrate on how much fun it was going to be when I surprised my boyfriend with my pink porno treat.

By the time Brian rang my doorbell that evening and I answered it wearing high heels, stockings and a lace garter belt under my skirt, I was hornier than I'd been in a long time.

The sex, however, was no better. Anyone who could only have sex if you tamed your hair into non-existence wasn't ever going to have sex

that was untamed. And now I, having betrayed my instinct, my body, myself, was just as bad a lover. The whole exchange was as sterile as my new twat and his dainty manscaped penis.

Afterward we lay in bed, consumerism's Adam and Eve, attractive ispenders with designer t-shirts and shoes lying scattered on the floor, teeth so Crest Whitestripped they glowed in the dark, Equinox bodies and packaged product genitals. The couple from an ad in a glossy magazine. All that was missing were the invulnerable blank eyes. We were anything but invulnerable. Outside my window, the lights of Manhattan outshone the stars.

The realization that I was never going to see Brian again wasn't without sting. And I could feel that he too knew things were over and was lying in the dark disappointed to come to the end of yet another go at love. We were far from Eden indeed.