

# Beautiful Brown Skin

My *bua* stumbles into the room, a large box in her hands, her head is turned to the side to navigate through the door.

Something, in that box, is rustling to her steps and stumbles, and it's not until she drops the box in front of me do I find out my pet-dog-filled guesses are wrong.

Tubes, all stacked into a pile, are stuffed into this box — a box which I could see, now, threaten to break.

“Here.” she says, letting out a breath, leaning back to readjust her back.

“What is this?” I ask, picking up one of the tubes.

“It's for *you*,” my *bua* said. She lightly slaps the back of my head, playfully adding “stupid.”

*FAIR AND BEAUTIFUL* are the words written on the front. Staring back at me from the tube is a woman, light-skinned, and, behind her, her dark-skinned clone sits back in the shadow, looking off into the distance...

discarded.

The symbolism misses me. “Yeah, yeah.” I reply in Hindi, “but what is this *for*?”

She tilts her head, “come.” she says.

I follow her through the house, passing the walls, made of stone, their cracks lead me through the short hall into the atrium. On the floor I find my grandfather's half-done work — glossed white paint spotted the ground sloppily. The darkened walls are being painted over, a soaked mix of cement-sand is wiped over the cracks. I reach out to it right before we enter the atrium, and I tap my hand against the ridge.

I make a note to myself to sand them down before he makes the terrible mistake of painting on them.

I run ahead to catch up with my *bua*.

Whenever I entered the atrium, it was like I was entering heaven — there's no better word for it, really, because this is where the sun hit the best, in the golden hours of the morning. My first step is always met by the rainwater on the floor, and there's ants that scatter away from me, hiding back in the ridges of the room. My feet turn cold, but with the next step, into the sun, there's enough shine for comfort.

We stop just outside the bathroom, too small to have a mirror inside, so the sink and mirror sit outside of it, against the wall. My *bua* holds me by the shoulders, her hands cold from a fresh wash after breakfast, and she pulls me to stand in front of the glass.

I stare at myself. The mirror's clouded from the sunlight, but I could see, clearly, that I was tired, jetlag wrote itself all over my face. My *bua* leans her head onto my shoulder — this is regular, in India, where your aunts and cousins act like your oldest friend, although we've only met hours before.

I understand this custom well, and so I lean into the act, smiling back at her in the reflection.

Pals.

I feel her reaching for my hand, and I give it to her. She pries it open, I didn't resist, and she puts it palm-front to the mirror.

“See this?” she asks.

I frown.

“Yes?” I say, confused.

“Now...” she brings up her other hand, and holds my face, thumb and fingers of one hand on each cheek. Think of your skin being from this,” she taps her finger on my face, “to...” she points to the palm of my hand, “this. Lighter.”

I tilt my head, looking closely. I’m not sure what she’s talking about.

“More beautiful.” she adds.

My brows draw further than before.

There’s a call from the kitchen, it’s my father — her brother. She shouts back a “*coming!*” to him, almost into my ear.

“Think of it.” she says, letting go of my head and my hand.

Lifting her sari centimeters from the rain-wet floor, I watch her, in the mirror, jog away on her toes.

“Yaar!” My dad calls again.

“Impatient!” my bua shouts back, “I said I’m coming!”

“Just tell me where is the sugar!”

The commotion continues in the background, but it’s... muffled.

I’m still staring at myself in the mirror.

Slowly, I lift a hand, and press the tips to my face. It’s hot, in India, my skin only getting darker ever since my arrival.

I press,

and I drag.

Nothing changes, so I do it again. And again. And again.

“What are you doing?”

I flinch, turning around to find my mother. She’s just woken up, standing at the door of my father’s childhood bedroom.

“Itching myself.” I lie.

She drew her brows.

I froze at the look, and at that point, I was just waiting for an answer to stutter at. I was sure I’d get a lecture, get yelled at for caring about my looks...

She kept staring, and I stood still, cowering under her gaze but not moving an inch. My eyes probably said it all: fear.

Then she sighed.

And just like that, she quit.

“God knows.” she whispers, almost as if disappointed by my lying. I take it, because she doesn’t fight my answer enough for me to have to give a new one. She turns around, slowly, and drags herself back to the bed.

I wait until my father follows her in, his hands balancing a tray of chai. My bua walks by seconds after, raising her brows at me and repeating her words from before.

“Think about it.” she says with a pressed-lip smile, bringing her cup of chai to her mouth.

She disappears around the corner, and I wait moments to be sure no one was watching.

Then, slowly, I bring my hand in front of me, looking closely at my fingers — the same fingers I wiped my face with.

There's no color — nothing came off. The dark on my face was permanent, it's been there for years and was planning to stay for years after.

I look over, finding the tube waiting in the sink. The light-skinned woman smiles at me, softly, delicately.

I refuse to look at her dark-skinned clone.

Months later, it was the first day of school. I woke up tired, and brushed a little too fast for my tastes.

I remember rushing back into my room, reaching under my bed.

Slipping out the tube.

*FAIR AND BEAUTIFUL.*

I run back to the bathroom, press a bit of the cream onto my hands, and start circling the paste around my face, pressing it in, letting it sit, then washing it off.

I look back in the mirror. There's a droplet of water at the tip of my nose, giving it a funny shape.

I flick it away.

*Maybe something is happening. I think. Maybe I just can't see it because of the lighting. Maybe it's happening too slow for me to realize. Maybe—*

"Daughter!" my mother calls in Hindi.

"I'm coming! Almost ready!" I lie.

Hours later, I'm at school. I'm in fourth grade.

I'm rubbing my feet together under the desk, it's my first day of school, usually the day when I'm the loudest. There are new kids coming in, and usually, I would help them around, but I just... can't.

I'm shy. I'm...

Unlikable.

I clear my throat, looking down, trying to push the sudden word out of my head.

But they don't leave.

*You won't have friends. My bua's voice says to me. People will look at you and say ew, look at how dirty that girl's face is.*

My friend, Rory, sits across from me. She's excited, jumpy, and starts telling me of an escaped tiger outside her home. People start bunching around, eager to hear the story.

I cower at the attention, hiding under my head.

"Hey," Rory taps my arm, and, always the mother of the group, she asked if I were okay.

I fake a yawn. "Just sleepy." I say.

"Aw. You're so cute when you're tired."

I ignore the comment with a smile, and shove my face back to my arms.

The school day goes as first days go: long, tiring, endless conversations about our names and talents and specialties.

When I reach home, there's another crowd. Kids from the elementary school and middle school are right outside my home, crowded into a circle.

I'm small, and the younger kids are already near the center, so I slip under the arms of the tall girls, shove past the boys, — a short show of my dominance — and I stop near the middle.

We're in a circle, surrounding a woman. She's wearing what ballerinas wear, and there's a smooth mat below her. She's smiling strong, standing tall, greeting all the kids.

“DO A FLIP!”

I turn around, finding a short middle school boy — a class clown — raise his fist. He starts chanting.

“DO! A! FLIP! DO! A! FLIP! DO! A—”

“I don't do flips, honey.”

I turn back to the ballerina. Her voice sounds so smooth. She's wearing silk brown ballerina shoes, I don't know what they're called, but they're not pink like the ones in the cartoons.

She nods to someone in the back, and I follow her line of vision. There's a camera man, his eye pressed to the lens. Behind him is another man with a thumbs-up.

I turn back, finding her straighten her back.

Her skin is dark, like mine. Her hair is black and tied up into a bun, tightened back.

I watch her.

She does some movements, their soft, concentrated on balance, a flow-like movement. There's a confidence to it so rock solid, with the looks of something so fragile...

I can't look away.

Moments later, she starts doing spins.

I could feel my eyes widen without my permission.

I'm watching something so... beautiful. I'm watching it with all these people, but it feels like I'm alone. I stumble back, hoping I'm not leaning in too far from the group.

She looks at me when she pauses, the edges of her lips rose, she raises her brows at me.

I'm not sure what to do, so I smile back.

At the end, she bows, her shining all-teeth smile back on her face. We cheer, clap, some kids leave, rewatching the videos they took on their phone.

She's crouched a little, talking to a child my height, letting him touch at the silk on her arms. The camera records the two.

I watch her, but I don't come forward. I don't want to be on the camera. I can already imagine my mother scolding me for being so girly, for not concentrating on my homework. I wait until the cameras are gone, until the woman is right outside her car, about to go in.

I run forward.

“Woah!” she says, laughing. “That's a fast child!”

“I really liked your dance.” I say.

Her brows draw, a smile comes back on her face.

Getting out of the door, she sits down on the step-up of her car to be at my height.

“That’s so nice,” she says. “Thank you so much.”

I open my mouth for another question, but then I close it.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

I tell her.

“Wow,” she raises her brows, “that’s such a beautiful name.”

Having a foreign name, I’m used to that reply. I throw another question at her.

“Why aren’t your shoes pink?” I ask. “Are they different colors? Do they show how good you are?

Like Karate belts?”

I’m met with a laugh, and I wait for her to answer the question.

“No, honey,” she says in between laughs, “they aren’t like Karate belts.”

“Then what are they like?”

“Well,” she says, leaning forward, “have you ever seen a ballerina who looks like me? Like you?”

“Like what?”

She points to the back of her hand, lying in on her lap in front of her. “With dark skin. Have you ever seen a black or brown ballerina?”

I think, but not for long, because nothing comes to my head.

“No.” I say.

“Well,” she spreads her arms, “now you see one here! Me!”

“You don’t use ‘Fair and Beautiful?’” I ask, and I find the question awfully raw.

“Huh?”

“It’s a cream.” I say. “It makes me prettier.”

Her brows draw, and I’m almost embarrassed.

“Prettier?” she asks. I hold myself still, because I don’t know if I’m about to be lectured or praised.

The wait is exhausting.

“*Prettier?*” she asks again.

I almost nod, but I hold myself.

“Look at you!” she says, gripping my shoulders, “look. at. you. What about... *you* do you think needs fixing?”

I don’t know what to say, mainly because I simply don’t understand. She is gripping the shoulders of a faulty girl who, in just a few more months, will be beautiful.

But what she says next catches me off guard.

“You, my friend,” she says, “you are a *beautiful* brown girl.”

My mouth drops, I think — it is such a small, minute movement that I’m not even sure whether or not my lips are parted.

She stands up, stepping back into her car and turning on the engine.

“And in the future,” she says, “you’ll see more beautiful brown girls!”

I step back for her to close the door, and she opens her window.

“And more!” she says, starting to drive away. “And more!”

I find myself choke, tears coming to my eyes. I can't cry. There are still some children here, watching. Through the numbing pain in my throat, I translate my tears into a smile.

"And more!" she says again.

I wave my hand goodbye to her

"And more and more and more!" she sings.

She's down the street as a dot: small, gone.

My thoughts are nothing such.

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It's dinner, now.

I had cried after the talk, but my glasses hide it well.

We don't sit at the table, as a family. Instead, we're scattered across the living room, the kids on the floors, watching cartoons. My parents and grandparents sit on the couch, talking about the latest news in India.

"I saw there was a crowd outside today." my dad mentions.

"Yeah, I saw that too." my mom adds, "you were there, weren't you?"

I realize she's talking to me.

"Yes." I say.

"Why? What was there?" my mom stuffs a cupped piece of roti with sabzi into her mouth right after asking, then she takes a sip of her daal.

"Someone doing flips." I say.

"Flips?"

"Not flips. Spins."

"Spins? A dancer?"

I forget to answer, and I find myself back in thought.

Beautiful.

That was a vocabulary word I had learned just last year. It was a word I had identified being side-by-side with *fair*.

The ballerina's voice is in my head again:

*You are a beautiful brown girl.*

"Jasmit?"

"Hm?" I ask, then, replaying her question in my head, I say "yes."

A while later, I'm in my room.

Under the bed, I'm straining to reach the tube. I had rolled it a little too far, this time.

The tips of my fingers are the first to touch the tube. I push further, wrapping them around it, and sliding myself back out, picking up carpet burns on the journey.

"Oh!" My brother says, finding me with the tube. "Give me that! I used mine up."

I jump up on the bed and run.

"No!" I shout.

I run downstairs, finding my parents at the couch, enjoying television.

“Go to sleep, daughter.” my father says.

I snatch the scissors from the drawer, and run outside.

—

Hi.

It’s me, Jasmit. Seven years later. I had stopped narrating my story simply because I had learned the secret rule to my childhood: *shh*.

My thoughts had turned soft, after that day, only upon the realization of this: I needed to be a child.

So I’ll narrate this from the view of my old bedroom’s window, reimagining the moment.

I had ran across the street, and we spent the rest of the day there, me and my friends. None of our parents new of this invention I had created: rolled balls of rice, put together with the secret ingredient of Fair and Beautiful. We swung our arms at each other, throwing with the full force of our childhood-strength. I was convinced that I was the best, lifting my back foot at every effort I threw.

Rory was there. She was happy, giddy, even — she was seeing my return from the summer days of blank calls, from the school day of my silence. She didn’t know what had happened, but she knew this: I was happy, and that made her happy.

We played throughout the day, the balls exploding on impact, the weakening crust of the product quitting, and the leftover cream splattering onto our shirts. We were scolded heavily, that day, one by one, each by all of our mothers.

The tube, which I had once worshiped every droplet of, laid on the ground. A tube that was once half-full in my ongoing efforts of reaching this never-existing beauty, was now cut in half, its cream in the left-overs of the rice-balls. Some clung onto the inside of a bowl, wiped nearly clean by our game.

Really, as I describe this, it’s a blur, the clearest thing being this: the ballerina’s smile, then Rory’s, then, as I turned around to pick up another rice-ball, I had faced my own, in the reflection of a glass door.

I looked lively.

I looked...

beautiful.

When the playing had finished, and the sun threatened to leave us in the dark, I gave my hugs of *see you tomorrow’s*, and went back into my house.

The cold came fast, and snow immediately dragged after. It fell over the mess of our game, melting and mixing with the cream.

Not long later, a snow-cleaner grumbled and groaned as it drove through the town, taking the snow, and the cream, away, exposing the dark grounds in its original form.