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## Reclaiming My Roots

For years, I have struggled with managing my unruly black hair. One day it would be a frizzy poof—the next, a flattened wave. I could never figure out the ideal cocktail of hair products that would work best for taming this bird’s nest. After yet another bad hair day, I vent my frustrations to my mom, “I’m sick of my hair. I just want to chop it all off.”

“Have you tried *sarson ka tel*?” *Sarson ka tel*, or mustard oil, has been historically used by South Asians for hair oiling. I balk at this suggestion, convinced that a thousand-year-old practice was no match for my shaggy mop. A thought arose unbidden: I did not want to be the stereotypical South Asian guy with oily hair. I was no *fob*, no “fresh-off-the-boat” immigrant who garnered strange looks and wrinkled noses like my uncle did when he first came to the U.S. over 40 years ago with oil-slicked hair.

“I always oiled your hair after baths when you were a baby. Hardly missed a day.” My mom’s voice transports me to a not-so-distant past. Foggy memories of my mom’s calloused hands massaging oil into my smooth, shiny, close-cropped hair as I squirm to get a better angle of the TV that was playing the intro to *Arthur*, my then-favorite cartoon show.

Snapped back to the present, I cautiously relent. I’ve tried everything else, so there’s nothing left to lose, right?

I sit cross-legged on the plush carpet in front of where my mom is perched on the couch. She unscrews the cap of a small plastic bottle and a sharp, pungent smell wafts toward me. I feel the coolness of the oil kiss my scalp, and suddenly a strange sense of ease flows down my body. My eyes fall shut, my shoulders loosen, and my limbs relax. My mom sweeps her fingers across my head, gently working the oil into the roots of my unkempt hair.

Several minutes later, I feel the loss of her touch. I open my eyes and turn to her. “*Bas*.” She was done. “Do this once a week for a few weeks and see if it makes a difference.”

Lazily, I pick myself up and make my way to the bathroom mirror, not expecting much. I can hardly believe my eyes. My curls had gained a luster and smoothness that had always seemed out of reach. The hair that had only given me tremendous grief seemed to finally decide to yield to my mom’s gentle coaxing.

I hear her voice carry from the other room. “Make sure you wrap your hair in a *kapra* when you go to sleep. Don’t get oil on the sheets.”

Now, months later, this has become a routine for us. Once a week, like clockwork, I take my position on the carpeted floor and my mom works her magic. Beyond the physical comfort I feel, I notice that this practice helps us cultivate a greater emotional closeness. Often, she shares stories of her childhood during this time, weaving familial connections across time and space. She tells me of her mom—my grandma—oiling and braiding her own frizzy, curly hair.

Other stories, less lighthearted and more vulnerable, pour forth. Stories about my mom’s first

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time taking the bus in the U.S., how she missed her stop because she could never quite wrap her tongue around the strange street names. Stories about calls she would receive from her brother, my uncle, when he first came to the U.S. while she was still in Pakistan. “I met a *desi* brother today,” he told her excitedly through the various interruptions and whims of calling cards. “I made *aloo gobi* for him.”

I try to imagine myself in my uncle’s shoes, with no phone or internet, traversing Chicago streets in the seventies. I imagine trying to find a job in a place where no one looks or dresses like me, where no one speaks the language that feels most comfortable on my tongue, and where people give my oiled hair and spicy food odd looks.

“It was harder when your uncle first came here, but he made it easier for us,” my mom says, almost absentmindedly. Through these stories, I receive a glimpse of her through various lenses, in different times and spaces. I see her as a little girl, as the youngest daughter and the somewhat spoiled baby sister. I see her at a payphone in the nineties, rummaging in her bag for change, calling her older brother to ask for help navigating this sprawling city.

And I see her in myself. In my slightly too-large nose, in my messy curls, in my love for spicy potatoes.

As I prepare to go off for college, this ostensibly uneventful time between my mom and me becomes extra special. When Michelle Zauner says, “We’re all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves,” it struck me that these pieces are ever-changing. Sometimes they’re the taste of a food, a type of clothing, a specific place. But oftentimes, pieces of home—pieces of ourselves—are in the ones we love. They’re in my mom’s well-worn hands, they’re in her stash of hair oils from “back home,” they’re in her stories and memories. These seemingly ordinary things become extraordinary because of the meaning and people embedded within.