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Audrey Curtis
Dominican University of California

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BEING BLOND

Audrey Curtis audrey.curtis@students.dominican.edu

The vast majority of people have hair, and, however they choose to cut, color, or style it, it's always there, on top of their head (and frequently hanging off onto the sides). For me, my hair is always present in a much more vividly apparent way than is true of most people, for I am blond. I am not dirty blond or even strawberry blond. I am bright, shiny, blond, and however much I would like to believe that my blond hair is just hair, friends, family, random passersby, and even society at large are always there to remind me otherwise. They tell me that being blond is special, beautiful, a sign of a weakened intellect, and many more equally absurd things.

This wasn't always true for me. When I was born, I had no hair at all. I had "peach fuzz" as my mom calls it. I did not grow actual hair until I was two years old. It is quite telling then that, despite not having hair for my first two years of life, one of my very first memories is focused on my hair, my blond hair. When I was three years old, my parents took my siblings and me to Disneyland. It was a fantastic trip, except for one very peculiar instance. While my parents and I were in line for a ride (it was either "Pirates of the Caribbean" or "It's a Small World;" I know there was a boat involved) and waiting patiently, I suddenly felt something pull on my head. As I turned around, I realized that two elderly Chinese women were playing with my hair and making exclamations that I could not understand. Though I now realize that they were probably just surprised to see hair so pale (my hair was just a shade darker than white when I was three) because blond hair rarely occurs in China and that they meant no harm, at the time, I was genuinely afraid, but I was also something else. I was aware of my hair, and I was aware that it was unique. Since that moment, my hair has become a very important part of my identity and it has been the cause of many great and many terrible things.

Being Blond is Wonderful!

In the movie star culture that is ever-present in America today, being blond is seen as synonymous with being fun, free-spirited, sexy, the ideal. This connection can be seen in such common phrases as "Blondes have more fun" and "Gentlemen prefer blondes" (it's interesting how everybody always seems to forget the second half of that phrase, "But they marry brunettes"). The idea of associating bloneness with sexy celebrity has even been popularized in such songs as "Rockstar" by Nickelback that has the lyrics, "We'll hang out in the coolest bars... and every good gold digger's gonna wind up there and every Playboy bunny with her bleach blond hair." The most famous sex symbol of all time, Marilyn Monroe, was infamously blond, and one of the first things many teenage celebrities do once they get an agent is bleach their hair. This was especially true during the days of Pop when Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, and Mandy Moore all entered the spotlight at approximately the same time. This phenomenon occurred when I was about eleven and secured the idea of blond being best in my head, but the seeds of the idea had been planted long before.

I have an older sister, and she was an extremely rebellious teenager. When I was about four she started dying her hair. She would dye it any shade of red, brown or black she fancied, and this caused my mom endless anxiety, for my sister was blond, not as blond as I was, but pretty blond. "Why do you want to dye your hair," my mom would repeatedly ask her, "when women would die to have your hair color? Do you know how much people pay to get their hair to look half as light as yours?" Though my mom always let my sister go ahead and change her color, the idea was always present in our house that anyone who dyes her naturally blond hair is ungrateful and frivolous. I think the message my mom was actually trying to get across was to be happy with your appearance the way it is, but the dual meaning always struck home with me. From a very early age I was determined to leave my hair as blond as nature allowed.

Though my being blond did not seem to affect me much in high school, I do have a very cherished blond memory from my freshman year at college. At the time I was good friends with four girls, and we would hang out and go to meals together. One night at dinner, we were all sitting at a round table with just enough room for us five, and we suddenly realized that all five of us were blond. Though we had never noticed that before and it had never mattered, at that moment we all felt a surge of power and prestige. After that, we started calling each other "fellow blondes" and actively thinking of ourselves as a group of hot blondes. Though it seems like just a silly thing we did, that association had a big impact on me. Throughout high school and entering college, I never thought of myself as particularly attractive, and I had virtually no confidence in anything but my intelligence, which is a very good thing to have confidence in but is unfortunately not enough to make a seventeen year old girl happy with herself. Being part of the blondes changed that. These were some of the most beautiful women on campus, and they thought I was like them. Other people associated me with them. Though nothing actually happened, to my physical appearance or to the way I was treated by others, I felt much better about myself and about my body. I felt attractive, not because I was wearing a nice dress or a certain arrangement of make-up, but because of something that I always had, because of my blond hair. Luckily, since then, my body confidence has grown to have nothing to do with my hair, or even my body for that matter, but rather is based in who I am as a person, not as a visual, but that moment marks the beginning of my confidence.

With all the memories surrounding my hair, I feel as though it is very important to say that I LOVE it. I really do. I love that it is shiny and bright and that the color varies throughout. I love that every time I get my hair cut one of the stylists in the salon compliments it. I love that I do not have to worry about highlights or expensive dyes. I love that it gets lighter when I spend a lot of time in the sun, but just because I love everything about my hair does not mean that I love everything about being blond. The fact that I am blond has caused some of the most painful and awkward memories in my life.

Being Blond is Terrible.

When I was ten, I had these adorable overalls. They were bright yellow. I also had a shirt my parents bought me when we were on vacation in Santa Cruz. It had a mermaid on it. It was also bright yellow. One day, I wore that shirt with those overalls to baseball practice. I thought it was a cute outfit that would be good to run around in, and it was. Practice went fine. The next day at school, however, did not. One of my friends caught up with me at recess and told me she had seen me the night before. Then she said, "You looked like a banana" in a remarkably derisive tone for an eleven year old. Though the yellow on yellow outfit was a big part of that banana look, I knew that my yellow hair was what really sealed the comparison. At the time, I was humiliated. I thought I had looked stupid in front my friend and my whole baseball team, composed entirely of boys, one of whom I had a crush on at the time. After she said that, I did not wear anything yellow for a full eight years. Though yellow has always been one of my very favorite colors, I was terrified of wearing it. I eventually got over my fear of yellow (I am wearing a yellow shirt as I write this), but it stuck with me for a long time. I still cringe when I think of it, even though it was literally half my lifetime ago, but, despite the cringing, being called a banana clone is not my most painful memory associated with having fair hair.

"I love blonde jokes," I proclaimed to the group huddled around a work table in my seventh grade woodshop class. April, a fellow blonde at the table, agreed. "Then why don't you tell one?" the boys at the table joined in. "Alright, why is a blonde's coffin shaped like a Y?" April asked. "Because whenever a blonde lies down, her legs spread apart." Everyone else laughed and went back to their sanding, but I was shocked. That was nothing like the blonde jokes I had heard and for which I had expressed my appreciation. The ones I had heard were along the lines of, "How do you drown a blonde? Put a scratch and sniff sticker at the bottom of a pool." I loved dumb blonde jokes, but I had no idea that there was a whole other brand of blonde jokes out there with which I was, and still am, much less pleased.

The first time I ever saw a lot of the other blonde jokes at the same time occurred when my friends and I were at Great America during our junior year of high school. We were just casually flipping through the posters at one of the stores in the park, when we flipped to one that consisted entirely of dirty jokes, all of them about blondes. Though the fact that someone would want these on their wall, that there was an entire poster (at a family amusement park, no less) dedicated to calling blondes dumb and slutty, disturbed me greatly, I felt compelled to read them all. I could not pull myself away; I had to keep reading even as each joke twisted my stomach a little more, made me feel a little more nauseated. Sexual jokes in general bother me greatly because they are degrading, but jokes targeted at blondes, at me, make me feel not only degraded but also dirty, less worthy, and seen as something that I certainly am not. What is even worse is that the jokes are not simply "funny" things that are tossed around for no reason; they are reflections of the stereotypes that continue to exist about blondes.

The most apparent blonde stereotype is the idea of the dumb blonde. This idea has never bothered me because I have never been afraid of others perceiving me as dumb. I know I am intelligent, and, regardless of what people may think upon first seeing me,

they soon know that I am intelligent as well. Also, being a female and being perceived as dumb is insulting, but it does not carry any particular weight in today's culture. Even ditzy people are often respected and admired. The same is unfortunately not true for females who are perceived to be the other blonde stereotype, promiscuous.

Modern America can be considered very egalitarian in a number of ways, but a terrible double standard still exists. A man who has many sexual partners is a "stud" or a "pimp" (and the fact that being called a pimp is considered to be a good thing reveals a lot about the position of women in our society), but a woman who has many sexual partners is considered a "slut" or a "whore," whether or not she actually sells her body. Therefore, having people assume that you are promiscuous just because of the color of your hair can be very painful and damaging because of the extreme negative connotation of that idea. Also, when men believe this stereotype, they are likely to treat you differently.

When I was working at Blockbuster about a year ago, I noticed that around half of the men who came in the store by themselves, with male friends, or in a few notable cases, with their children, would flirt with me, but far fewer would flirt with my brunette co-workers, even though they were all very attractive women. Sometimes I didn't mind the attention, especially when it helped me reach my sales quota, but oftentimes it got very annoying. Every once in awhile it would get downright creepy. One time a customer actually followed me to my car and pounded on my window after I got off work because I would not give him my phone number. I am not saying this would not have happened had I had darker hair, but in the entire two years I worked there it did not happen to any of the other employees, none of whom were blond.

Being blond marks you out for male attention, and, unlike other physical traits that do the same, such as large breasts or a small waist, bloneness cannot be hidden. I expect to get attention when I go out in a low-cut top or a fitted dress, but not when I wear sweatpants and my boyfriend's fleece sweater. It does not matter though. My hair acts as a beacon, calling attention to my head and therefore to the rest of me. Sometimes I just want to go unnoticed, be part of the background, but that's simply not possible as long as I remain blond or the unreasonable idea of blondes having more fun and more sex dies out. While I do not think the latter is going to happen any time soon, the former might.

Being Blonde is Me... For Now

My mother was blond when she was young, but by the time she was twenty, her hair had developed into a rich brown shade. My dad was blond until he was about four; now his hair is black. Genetically speaking, it is unlikely that I will be blonde forever, and my hair has been gradually getting darker my entire life. While the top of it may be sun-bleached from working at a summer camp for almost fifty hours a week, the undersides of my hair are very dark blond and even brown in some spots. When I was younger, the knowledge that I would, in all likelihood, be a brunette someday made me sad. I was very attached to being blond, but now I like the idea of having darker hair, not because I

am desperate to avoid being prematurely labeled, but because I like the idea of change. Also, the brown color that is developing is really very pretty, and I think it might look better with my complexion than the pale color that is currently visible. Mostly though, I am just slowly learning to not identify myself as a blonde. Though I love my hair, I do not think it should define me, and I do not want to risk developing my own opinion of myself in accord with the stereotypes. Being blond is great, but it's only temporary. That's all right with me.