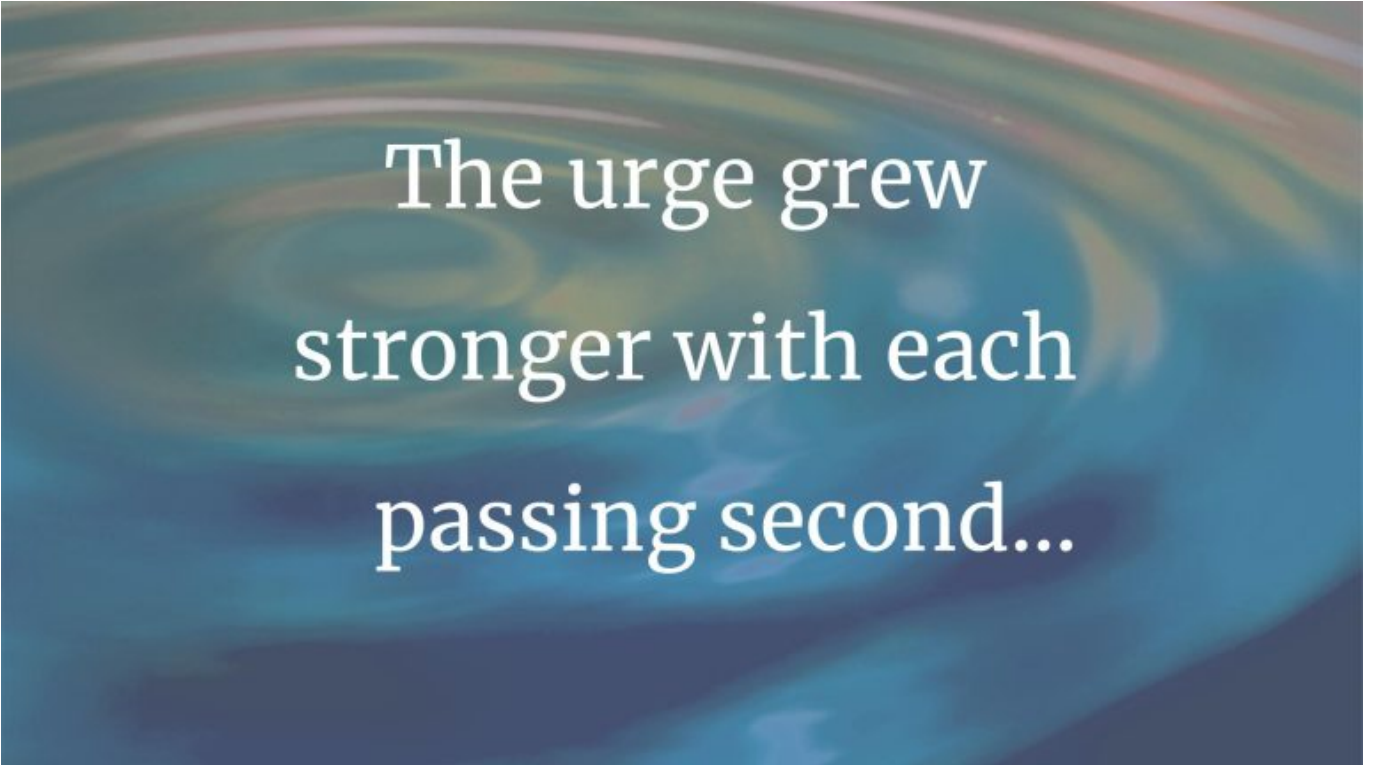


A Puzzling Impulse

Category: Stories

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stronger with each
passing second...

Editor's Note: This piece was awarded an honorable mention in the Pulse writing contest, "On Being Different."

My mother has always advised me that it is good to be "different." She herself, growing up, wanted to be different in both her personality and her fashion. But her wish to be unique is not something I've inherited.

Beginning in elementary school, the last thing I wanted was to be different from my school friends—in fact, I wanted to *be* them. This made things difficult, as I was the only brown person in my primarily white friend group.

Sensing that I was deemed less intelligent and less beautiful than my friends, I realized that this might have to do with my skin color, and how other people viewed it.

Whenever my elementary-school classmates picked groups for our projects, my white friends were consistently picked first. I was the last choice.

In the third grade, I set out to obtain white skin like my friends'. After doing a deep Google dive on natural "brightening" methods, I scrubbed my skin with rock-hard baking soda mixed with tomato juice. When that didn't work, I tried lemon juice. Of course, that didn't work either.

I thought I'd finally found the key when I came across a YouTube video called something like "How to Become White." In it, a dark-skinned man rubbed his face with ridiculously white makeup powder; eventually, it became apparent

that he was joking. He ended by declaring that no one should ever try to change their skin color. I was furious: I truly did want a tutorial on how to achieve pale skin. I loathed being the one person among all my friends who was treated differently because of skin color.

Over the next few years, though, my hatred for my “brownness” diminished as I turned my focus to something else that set me apart: a mental illness.

One afternoon in November 2017, when I was in sixth grade, I sat at my office room desk, doing math homework. All at once, I felt an urge to pull out an eyelash.

I thought it was just an itch; but after pulling at my eye for a moment, I saw ten lashes resting on my fingertip.

I sprinted to the mirror and saw a bald spot in my full eyelashes, a gift of my South Asian heritage. Small wonder that, given my age and my dislike of looking “different,” I freaked out.

My mom reassured me that the eyelashes would grow back: “They likely just fell out due to allergies.”

I believed her—until the next day. In the last period at school, I felt the urge to pull out more eyelashes. Although I felt confused as to why I felt this urge, I did know that the consequences of letting myself act on it would be catastrophic.

The urge grew stronger with each passing second, until I could no longer think about anything but the chunk of eyelashes that my mind was telling me needed to be removed. This episode, more severe than the previous one, rendered my left eye completely bare.

Arriving home, I researched my abnormal behavior and found to my surprise that it was an actual mental disorder: trichotillomania.

A compulsive hair-pulling disorder, trichotillomania typically begins in the preteen years—as in my case. This knowledge didn’t stop the urges, though. Within a few hours, my one-sided lack of eyelashes turned into zero lashes, period.

Several friends and family members spotted the change in my appearance and asked about it. To put a stop to their questions, I claimed it was allergies.

My seventh-grade self knew darned well that having no eyelashes made me less beautiful; I could only pray that others wouldn’t feel the same. My prayers’ failure was confirmed when, on Instagram, I discovered my “close” friends making fun of my bare eyelids.

A seventh-grader should never have to feel as devastated as I did that night. But I never confronted those girls, and though I distanced myself a bit, we remained friends.

I felt completely alone with my disorder. No one I knew had ever faced a

problem of this sort. Not only did my “friends” not look like me; they’d never felt the overpowering anxiety that I suffered while in the grip of my compulsion.

A typical episode consisted of my sitting atop the bathroom counter, using tweezers to rip out any baby eyelash roots. The anxiety erupted whenever I couldn’t grasp a hair that was too short; until it was out, I couldn’t breathe or think properly. Often, blood dripped from my eyelids as a result of my aggressive hair-pulling, and my fear of blood made the anxiety worse.

I’ve continued pulling out my eyelashes ever since, except for a two-year break during the eighth and ninth grades. This break came about when I opened up to my mom and explained that I was pulling out my hair due to my intense urges. She gave me a drastic wake up-call.

“If you can’t get this under control, we’ll need to get you some professional help,” she said, with urgency and concern.

The thought of needing professional help frightened me so much that I managed to stop completely for those two years. But eventually the compulsion returned.

Having no eyelashes damaged me far beyond increasing my anxiety and self-loathing; it also made me undesirable to guys. While my friends gossiped about the boys who were “in love” with them, I sulked that no one would ever find me attractive—in fact, without eyelashes, I looked sort of like a man myself. The few guys who admitted to having a crush on me were known to develop a new crush every day; they didn’t count.

The hair-pulling urges that started in sixth grade are with me to this day. In fact, my trichotillomania has intensified: In addition to sparse eyelashes, I now have gaping bald spots across the back of my head. With each strand of hair I pull, I feel more disconnected from the rest of the world. I’ve never felt able to relate to anyone about my condition, and that’s what makes being different feel so isolating.

Being different makes me feel that I’m unworthy of being loved, and that to achieve normalcy, I must constantly fight to change myself. I wear fake eyelashes, cover my bald spots with hairstyles or dark eyeshadow and hide at home as often as possible.

On the positive side, today most of my friends and family members know about my struggles, and I can lean on them for some sense of support. They reassure me that my disorder does not define me, and that I am beautiful regardless.

In my experience, our society leaves no room to be different. If you’re different from the majority of people, you’ll be treated differently, and not for the better. However, I believe that this needs to change.

Instead of people like me feeling that we must change to avoid being different, I believe that society must change to be more accepting of each individual—regardless of their looks, beliefs and values.