

# Lilith Magazine

## My Mother's Unshaved Legs

*Talia Liben Yarmush*

There's an age at which you start noticing the things about your parents that are embarrassing. The fact that your dad will say something and your mom will then burst into song, triggered by a single spoken word; the noise he makes when he clears his throat; or the way she eats a piece of chicken with her fingers, down to the bone.

This is how it was with my mother's unshaved legs. One day, I didn't even notice the thin hairs, almost camouflaged by her freckles, and the next day I was mortified.

My mother—the primary breadwinner in the family—was not like my friends' mothers. She did not attend school plays or drive carpools. My mother had been a teenager in the height of the Women's Liberation Movement. She was in 11th grade when, inspired by the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, she stopped shaving her legs and armpits, and started to go without a bra.

By the time she was a student at Bryn Mawr, the bra was back on and the armpits were smooth once more, both for practical reasons. But the legs remained unshaven. It was just easier that way, and anyway no one really noticed.

Until I was 13. At 13, my friends had started shaving their legs and plucking their eyebrows, and my own body had taken a new shape, curvier and softer, more like my mother's. A combination of the hormones, anxieties, and social tensions that are the hallmarks of the teenage years also conspired to cause in me a deep dislike of my own, ever-changing body, and thus the hatred I felt for myself manifested itself as embarrassment at my mother's benign choices.

"I'll never be like her," I always told myself after slamming the door in the aftermath of a mother-daughter argument.

But when I was 18, I made a big decision to be just like her, and accepted admission to Bryn Mawr College. Bryn Mawr was a haven for individuality. With physical distance between my mother and me, I felt closer to her than I had during high school. I learned to accept her

differences. She would never be the mother who attended school events, but she also never shied away from hard conversations—whether about sex, drugs, or leg hair—willing to answer my questions with love and care. She taught me that sex is natural and good, especially with someone you love; and that if I can't have a conversation with my partner about sex, then I'm not mature enough to be having sex. She taught me that alcohol is more dangerous than marijuana, and that being grounded is better than being dead, so I should never get behind the wheel of a car if I've been consuming either. And she taught me that people will always judge me for my choices and my appearance, but if I'm confident in the choices I make, I can hold my head up high.

One day, in my early thirties, I looked in the mirror and for a brief moment, I could have sworn I saw my mother looking back. Randomly, I find myself erupting into song when a word triggers a familiar melody. After two children, my body has only continued to resemble my mother's. Sometimes a full sentence will emerge from my lips and each word, each cadence, each facial expression, will mirror hers.

In my third trimester of pregnancy, I stopped shaving my legs. Not because I was motivated by Betty Friedan, but because I couldn't reach them. And then I didn't start again, because I liked the feel of it better, and it was just easier that way. At some point, I learned how to be my own person, not in relation to my mother, but with her guidance. Because my mom had taught me that it was okay to put my desires for my own body above what others thought was acceptable.

What I have learned from my mother's unshaved legs is to be less judgmental of others, to live a life of my own making and, perhaps most importantly, to love myself.

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