

That's So Sikh

A crank of the rusty handle. A creak of protest, and the overhead faucet squealed into life. A spray of icy water burst out to shrieks from the twelve-year-old girls standing below. Skipping and splashing under the water, they worked together to lather each others' hair in an efficient circle of scrub, rinse, repeat. In minutes, they were out of the shower, faucet cranked shut once again. Far from the spray's reach, I stood alone in the shadow of the pavilion, clutching my wide-toothed comb to my chest. I waited for them to scamper past before venturing out of the comfort of the shadows. While the other girls chattered in line for the ice cream truck, I tugged the shower handle around, letting the waterfall mat my hair against my head. For the next twenty minutes, I worked slowly and painfully through my curly, sea salt-tangled mane.

I was growing accustomed to feeling isolated by my uncut hair, a symbol of my Sikh faith. As a child, I basked in the praise I received for the precious bundle of curls framing my face, a joy to behold by all. I cherished the week I spent at Sikh camp each summer, hiking in a promenade of long braids. I learned to walk with my head held high as my counselors did, confident in my individuality just like them. As I grew older, though, my hair began to weigh me down. I longed to wear it free like my school friends did, adorning their heads with pretty bows. My heart sank when pool parties arose; I dreaded the hours I would labor alone afterward, wrestling through my unruly locks with conditioners and creams.

During freshman year biology, a few girls sitting behind me would tug relentlessly at my braid, howling with laughter. I started to wear two braids to tuck them forward and avoid their antics, although my classmates' shrieks of cruel delight echoed in my ears long afterward. I began to react defensively when often asked why my hair was so long. "It's against my religion to cut it," I replied curtly, leaving no room for further discussion.

During my junior year, I attended a Sikh camp in Wisconsin as a counselor. At hair hour, I marveled as boys pranced about, turban scarves billowing behind them like plumage. Girls perched in line on a bench, styling each others' hair into elaborate braids and buns. Nostalgic, I recalled the sense of kinship my hair had instilled in me as a camper myself. Just as I looked with awe to my counselors years ago, I was inspired by these children's confidence in their Sikh identity. I wondered, *Was it truly necessary for me to compromise the pride I felt in my heritage with my belonging in school?*

I began to reframe myself without realizing it, approaching questions about my hair with a tentative smile and explaining my Sikh background. Slowly, I reintroduced myself to people I had known my whole life. The weight I had carried on my head began to dissipate, as if being true to others had freed me. I started to wear one braid again as I recognized my classmates' newfound understanding and respect for my hair. Walking with growing confidence, I came to appreciate those who inquired into my appearance, resolving to ask more questions myself. Here and there, I encouraged my peers to share their stories; I learned about my gym teacher's Polish heritage, of a friend's first visit to his native Germany, and of another's struggle to speak English as a second language. I watched as all around me, conversations blossomed and I learned - of myself, my classmates, and the world around me. One day, as I grabbed a book from my locker, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair hung in a braid over my heart, head held high.