

You are Beautiful!

by Pinky C. Serafica

It happened that both my parents, being of Ilocano and Batangueño stock with nary a Spanish or American gene, gave birth to me, small from birth and if I may add, “petite” when I grew. So from southern Luzon—Taal, Batangas, to the central plains—Rosales, Pangasinan, to way up north, San Nicolas, Ilocos Norte, this firstborn from both sides got my fair share of “*maganda ka na talaga sana kung matangkad ka*” (you could have been really beautiful if you were tall); “*yung cute?*” (the cute girl?), “*di bale, matangkad naman ang agong mo*” (never mind, your nose is tall anyway).

It happened that my 5-year old frame struck a friendship with the *sampaloc* (tamarind) tree where I was taught the language of trees to learn to declare, “*So what?!*” And from there established a postulate that holds up to this day on how I see beauty and fashion.

It happened that Grace, my *kumare* (I am godmother to one of her children), defined by the books as pear-shaped and cruelly, elephant-legged, didn’t strike me as fat, though what she endured from a thin-obsessed society I cannot begin to measure. She was as comfortable with her shape and form, defying the rules made for sleeveless and mini skirt fashion that I sashayed my support for her brave ramp walks. Grace carried it off so well that when people talked

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about the politics of fat, I dreamily said, with the art and science of my so-what stance, “*Uh, Grace is fat?*”

It happened that my own brother, Empoy, my barometer for gentleness, is on the heavy side. To my 4 lbs. at birth, he was 9. To my 100 lbs. at 30, he is tipping the scales

at 26. Though he is casual and private about it, I am still pained by “*Oh, the fat guy?*” thrown his way mercilessly. I am always tempted to holler, “*Cut it out, he’s my lil bro!*” but in any given introduction, I’d always be perceived as the youngest of the brood with my build and butter. Lately though, I find myself taking his hand to walk him over the bridge of a gazillion details of diet because males in our family are particularly prone to heart attacks and his lifestyle of voracious eating with no exercise is a ticket to where we don’t want him to go.

It happened that in my foray with on-cam television, feminist me refused to put on make-up even if no animals were harmed in manufacturing those, only to be horrified later that I looked... polluted. I learned how to apply the colours than be mistaken for smog and deforestation. My director would commend my feature stories, but there was always the accompanying, “*But Pinks, please, the hair and make-up!*” But I already had a two-inch thick extra face before me, and weighed 5 pounds more from the goo on my hair and eyes. TV is a harsh medium.

It happened I caught this documentary where Afghan women would apply make-up to each other on the sly. Make-up was illegal, and the colours behind the *burqa* could land them a black and blue, but cosmetics were an affirmation that they were women, and that they were beautiful, and they *were*.

It happened that my pores and pimples were giving me outright problems for TV assignments that I finally decided to consult a dermatologist. And man, was that ever a sacrifice, with me, concluding, literally red-faced and puffed up, that beauty is the most painful thing after heartbreak. As a survivor, however, I now admit the attempt at clear skin, albeit with the help of astringents and toners and creams that have since been clogging my backpack, was worth the sacrifice.

It happened that I have always liked dressing up but refused to call it “fashion,” connecting the word to faddism, homogeneity, stereotyping and the mortal sin of consumerism. My body is my own canvass and not anybody else’s hardcourt. I am aghast at draping a casual outfit worth a helper’s monthly salary just to look like everybody else and gain acceptance for wearing somebody else’s name close to the zipper or nape. The sea of straight, long hair and black, tailored clothing hurts my eyes, the symmetry of sameness assaults me when I go to business districts

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or malls. I bussed a friend goodbye one time in yuppie Makati, her being my gauge for the what is “in” and “out” of the fashion world. I turned around for just one more story, and got bowled by a sense of loss—I couldn’t identify her back from countless others of the same hue and built.

It happened that I am a fan of *ukay-ukay* (used clothes) and *wag-wag* (onomatopoeic for shaking the clothes free from dust). The more vintage-like, the better, the more character, the better assurance the item wasn’t off-the-rack and therefore, not mass produced but lovingly crafted by a seamstress-artist. Admittedly, I am thrilled when getting a known tag for just a little over what a ride on a *jeepney* (local vehicle for mass transport) costs—around 7 U.S. cents—instead of the whole *jeepney*, but more accurately, it is the marrying of art with principle that gives me the high when I am able to combine economy with self-expression. If things can be recycled, I reason, then why can’t clothes? But I still obsess with the bourgeois process of ridding used clothes of the energy and smell of past owners. I soak the clothing in boiling water, wash twice, and spray with Lysol for good measure—and then laugh sheepishly from being able to ease up and reclaim the term “fashion” and being fashionable from those that dictate shape and size.

It happened that my teachers, many of whom were members of indigenous communities, equated fashion with culture and pride that I found myself choosing ethnic and hippie as the styles of choice. As with most things that I surround myself with, nothing is neutral—I do not wear ordinary clothing or shoes, what drapes me are symbols and statements of belief, politics and worldview. I can very rarely separate my framework from my bucks. So, I often put my money where my lipstick is, local, of natural material and process, to contribute to the empowerment processes of communities. My soul is too dramatic to accept that what I wear is dispassionate, does not have a story, except that it came from a factory. What I wear should be replete with details

and bear my personal stamp, although this is unseen.

It happened that a lump in my left breast kicked me to foray into vegetarianism, alternative medicine and conscious healing, long before Madonna, Oprah and Julia Roberts got into the groove. From then on, breasts for me were not a question of silicon or cleavage or size and cup and other stuff that women (because of their men) agonise over, but a question of whether I can have both intact and whole when I do decide to give birth and breastfeed, and more basic, whether I will live to see my turning 33.

It happened that I played the whole spectrum of “ists”—anarchist, environmentalist, feminist, activist—opting to explore the fringes with artists, musicians, poets, shamans, witches and rebels who, because of familiarity with the evolution of social norms, are uniformly suspicious of these. Which is why we all fall in love beyond class or race or gender, not because they have flat tummies or look like Tom Cruise but because while they may have paunches, they also have the most beautiful souls.

As a studious pilgrim of history, I realise that beauty is largely subjective and personal, though at the same time communal, and therefore, prey to the powers-that-be. Culture provides a standard to what is beautiful, but so do ideology, and more so now, capitalist economy. It used to be tattoos were warrior-oriented and testaments of the personal histories of ancient peoples. But they got to be appropriated by punks to create a counter-culture, and now by *tambays* (folk idling in street corners) to bring back the warrior—although this time, gang-style. Tattoos have also passed the hands of schoolgirls painting henna daisies on each other on a lazy summer day.

It happened that I know we can make a better world far beyond this physical reality. ♪

This article, in its original form, first appeared in the March 2002 issue of XYZine, Young Women’s Magazine, published in Mr. & Ms. Magazine.

Pinky C. Serafica would like nothing more than retire in a small cottage on top of a breezy pine and sunflower-covered hill with a mountain on her back and sea foam on her face. But, since she’s still 33, not yet crucified, and needing to save for that hill, cottage and shoreline, she is, in this lifetime, a writer, artist, and director for print, video, TV and radio features—with passions and ideals on her back, and a computer, camera and microphone on her face. Many times, her other lifetimes crowd in and she willingly metamorphose as back-pack traveller, cyclist, mountaineer, dancer, hand drummer, healer, witch and hippie.