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Heart of Darkness

A True Story

Maia Ramnath

March 2004

“If you could just fill out this form, the doctor will call you when she’s ready for you.”

“OK.”

It’s been years since she visited the gynecologist. She avoids medical attention at all costs, in a reverse-hypochondriac denial of her right to sickness. But she’s come now in honor of starting a new relationship, out of respect for someone else’s body; in the interests of full disclosure— of the truth, about her body and her health.

The grad student insurance plan makes it cheap and easy to drop by the student health center, gives her access to dentists and eyeglasses and emergency treatment if she needs it. At the same time, it’s grad school that’s tainted healthcare for her forever. After all, once you’ve read Foucault, you can never go back to the doctor again. She feels the net of surveillance; it grids her skin like a crossword puzzle, cinching close, drawing and quartering. Metal probes winkle out secrets, decode her heartbeat, peep through keyholes into her secret dark places. Then, forming conclusions from this

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ransacked knowledge, they will pass judgments and prescribe normalizing mechanisms for her own good.

Nor do they stop with the body. Her pen freezes over the column of blank lines. Why should she tell them if she drinks, or smokes, or how many times per week she has sex, whether she prefers to have it with boys or girls, or whether she has ever in her life been diagnosed with depression or bipolarity or an eating disorder? To what kind of further scrutiny or intervention will her answers submit her? Maybe some day they'll have blood tests and brain-chemistry read-outs for all these things, instant revelations of her personal history and phylogeny. For now, she can keep safe her self-knowledge. She can lie.

Then comes the question that always stymies her most of all. "Race/ethnicity: check all that apply." They didn't used to let you do that. The boxes have changed over the years; you get far more detailed options now. She usually just checks "Other." It's the easiest thing. The good part about that is that from the time she filled out her first form in pre-school, she's had no choice but to think outside the box, which can't but be healthy, right? This time she checks "East Indian or Pakistani" and "European(Anglo, Nordic)" and surrenders the clipboard to wait until they call her name.

She imagines the British colonial administrators with their census books and taxonomies, their cameras and calipers, fixing and filing the natives of South Asia under infinitely differentiated race headings. The martial, the effeminate, the subhuman. How would they have marked her? Would they have been angry when they learned her secret? She might have been allowed to be an ayah or a train conductor.

Her father once asked her if anyone had ever made her feel bad about being "mixed". She said no, she'd always felt special. So why does it matter, the need for connection, belonging, for people "like me"? Why does it ache? Especially since she doesn't want in to either box. Her externality gives her the perfect excuse to deviate from the strictures of feminine behavior,

She pulls on her jeans and sweatshirt: western, unisex.

Surface and depth: what's real, what's true? What did the doctor learn inside in the dark? Inside, race is irrelevant, with no biological basis as a valid category. Blood tests and pap smears reveal nothing. Outside, it's so much: a social construct by which arbitrary physical markers are selected in order to assign people to roles in an inequitable system, which process is then elaborately cloaked in the mystic justifications of god, state and empire.

"Are you dressed?"

"Yeah, come on in."

What's behind the mask, beneath the clothes? It doesn't matter. Race politics aren't about essentialized identity, whether imposed as a source of oppression or claimed as a source of strength. Race politics are about power dynamics, and one's functional role within them. About structures of privilege and control, and whether one's actions perpetuate these structures or break them down— whoever, whatever, wherever you are.

After a quick rundown of her options for the latest birth control products, she is allowed to go. Examination inconclusive. Her official classification is Other. She's a free alien. Knowledge cannot cage her. Truth escapes her.

“But it applies.”

“It’s blowing my mind. Here, you’re going to feel some pressure for a minute or two. Is this OK?”

She takes a deep (yogic) breath and nods.

“Relax your muscles a little bit. Everybody wants to tense up right here. Good. Anyway, I was just reading that part where they’re going up the river in the boat, and the tribesmen are shooting arrows from the riverbank. You know the part I mean?”

“Yes, I remember that.” The overhanging jungle, the hot shadows, the claustrophobia of the sluggish stream. The growing apprehension as one moves further into the unknown interior of the dark continent. Into the space of the speculum the doctor inserts a swab. Mistah Kurtz, you in there? She wants to laugh out loud. If she tried to write this down, the bluntness of the symbolism would sound crudely inept.

Meanwhile the doctor goes about her business with gentle efficiency. “Anyway, I just can’t help but be struck by the sheer arrogance of it all. I mean, the ignorance of the colonizers.” The doctor glances at her as if prompting further discourse. As if maybe she’ll say something erudite, perhaps suggest some sources for further reading. She only grunts assent. There’s metal in her vagina.

“OK, now relax, you’re tensing up again. This is going to feel cold.”

Here comes the information regime, opening her to categorization and control. Here comes the rational digital medical eye. Here comes the west up the dark river, creating her identity through its perception. But it’s a false ID; she’s itchy in the accoutrements of her skin. The doctor eases out the lubricated instruments and rubber fingers and she closes. She hears or imagines she hears that distinctive liquid glister of when you stir macaroni and cheese.

“You can go ahead and get dressed. I’ll be back in a minute.”

class or caste expectations. Thus within both sides of a proud and conservative extended family, she’s got an open-ended license for eccentricity. She’s already disqualified to a certain degree from standards of normalcy. She trusts the doctors will agree.

“Ms. Raym... Ramm...Ramnath? You can come on in to room two.”

A friend of hers, a philosopher, has been doing work on identity and identification, and the construction of race. The concept of phylogeny, says the philosopher, as used within Freudian discourse, relates to the necessity of fencing off permissible sexual behavior: too close and it’s family, which is taboo. Too distant and it’s beyond the pale, outside of us and into the realm of them, which is also taboo. Family lore has it that her mother’s grandfather Obert Nordgaard, upon meeting her mother’s fiancé Suresh, remarked with approval and wonder, “Well, that’s a Norse of a different color. He’s all right.” The philosopher is also exploring the implication that people’s perceptions determine what you are: that is, that they assign you a category and treat you accordingly, which inevitably shapes your self-concept, your experience, your way of being in the world. So you come to be what you look like, or at least you’re supposed to. It’s easy, so easy to acquiesce; to simply behave in the way that corresponds to who or what people think you are. She passes. People read her as white: does that make her white? After all, the structural mechanisms of racial inequity in the United States do not impact her negatively. She doesn’t need to worry about them. And yet to take this access for granted, to blithely join the in-group because she can, feels morally wrong.

“Could you roll up your sleeve a little more? That’s it. Just breathe normally.”

Finally, the philosopher is elaborating the themes of guilt and shame in relation to racial identity, and to dealing with racial oppression. I don’t have white guilt, she thinks. I have survivor’s guilt. She passes. She’s healthy and well-educated,

telltale signs of a middle-class upbringing. So if she checks this box, no one will ask her any questions: not law enforcement, not bigots, not office staff. Her secret is safe; the deception holds. But in keeping it, does she betray her conscience? And in accordance with conscience, where must her political solidarity go? It's in the search for political community that the cognitive dissonance of her race affiliation most becomes an issue.

In general she's tended to pursue her activism among white radicals. It's easy. They accept her. But there are differences in emphasis and prioritizing of issues within these circles that cause her increasing discomfort. For one thing, there's a tendency to push dogmas of "radicalism," based on contextually specific notions of ideological purity, that if universally applied, would either discredit or misread much of the language and strategy used by movements in the global south and among politically radical communities of color—communities for whom capitalism cannot be separated from colonialism, and for whom the term "nationalism," though inherently problematic, has a historical usage linked to liberatory struggle against both. Not least of all, there's the assumption that radicalism is expressed through particular ways of dressing, speaking, acting, eating, thinking and music-making which are typical of particular white countercultures. These too can colonize.

On the other hand, among activists of color, to whom such discussions make sense, her near-universally ascribed identity, along with her experience of class and skin privilege, often make her presence a strain. If she tries to act in ways that counter mainstream normativity, i.e. white cultural hegemony, she may be taken for just another orientalist commodity fetishizer. It's happened before. South Asian eyes range from hostility, to suspicion, to curiosity, to indifference. Whichever of these it is, she's not assumed to be part of the "we". It's in white-majority spaces that the inclusive assumption is made,

and there she feels like a dissembler, telling half-truths. You think I'm like you, but I'm not like you. She's an impostor. A secret agent. She can go deep undercover and listen to white people say ignorant things about brown people.

"Blood pressure looks good. Pulse...yes, very good."

"Achcha," her not unchauvinistic uncle Vishwanath once pronounced, upon seeing his brother's chichi children for the first time. "They'll have Indian intellects and American health. A desirable combination." ("Thanks. A lot," said her mom.)

After the nurse has dispensed with the preliminaries and she's stripped down to the paper robe, the gynecologist knocks discreetly. As the doctor adjusts her splayed position on the table and begins the exam, she makes pleasant conversation.

"I see you're on the grad student health plan. What's your field?"

"History."

"Good for you. Any particular area or period you specialize in?"

"Yes. Colonialism and radical resistance movements in general. Modern South Asia and the British Empire in particular."

"Fascinating stuff," the doctor says with animation. "I've read quite a few books about the Raj. I'm sure this is kind of silly for your level of knowledge, but PBS is going to be showing *The Far Pavilions* next week, in case you want to try and catch it."

"I'll definitely look for it."

She and her sister love lampooning colonial cinema. An actor, the sister once went to a casting call that specified half-desi/half-white, attractive female, mid-20s, but they told her she didn't look ethnic enough. "This is what it looks like," she said, storming out. Maybe she should have worn a bindi, and more eyeliner; isn't that how they usually do it in the movies?

"Right now I'm reading *Heart of Darkness*," says the doctor. "Have you read it?"

"Yes, I have."

"Of course that's Africa, not India, but..."