

Becoming a Woman: A Checklist

I. All women have to shave their legs.

At eleven years old, I sit criss-cross applesauce on a dirty carpet. My legs, folded over each other, are smooth as the skin of the barbie dolls I used to play with. My fifth-grade classmate reaches over and strokes my leg. Her fingers are cool but rough against my skin. At this age, we aren't yet worried about our hands being soft and pretty.

"Your leg is so smooth," she says. "Do you shave?"

I shake my head no. I want her to think I don't grow body hair, even though the thick coat over my arms tells a different story.

"Lucky," she says. "I want to shave, but my mom won't let me. She thinks we're too young."

She pulls up the leg of her pants, revealing a thin layer of blonde hair. I run my hand over it. It's soft and wispy. I wouldn't have noticed it was there if she hadn't pointed it out.

My mom doesn't even know I shave. She doesn't know that I've been stealing her razor for months, shaving while hidden in the shower. She doesn't notice that her blade wears down quicker than it used to. Or maybe she just pretends not to.

A week later, I'm sitting on the couch, across from my mom, who sits on the edge of the coffee table. One of my legs is perched on top of the other, and they bob slightly to the music coming from our kitchen. Mid-conversation, my mom looks down at my leg, then grabs it in her hand. Her fingers are hard and calloused. My mother is a busy woman. Mother of three, she doesn't

have time to worry about soft hands. She feels my smooth skin with the pad of her thumb. “Have you been shaving?” She asks harshly, but soft enough that I can’t tell if she’s mad or not. I shake my head again, but my mom knows me better than my classmate. She knows how, when I was born, I had a full head of hair and a bit down my back. She can see the mustache coming up over my upper lip when I forget to shave it. She knows I got my hair, my thick, dark hair, from my father, who got it from his mother. She knows my legs cannot be naturally smoother than the shower wall I’ve learned to prop my leg against.

The next day, a new, clean razor is sitting in the shower, identical to my mother’s, with my name written in black sharpie along the handle. That night, I shave with pride.

II. All women have to wear a bra.

In seventh grade, I’m afraid to wear my favorite shirts because they make my chest look pointy, like two tiny mountains. Instead, I choose big, thick hoodies and sweaters, which compress my chest and make it look less awkward.

For my thirteenth birthday, my mother gives me a gift bag with two training bras and a hair straightener wrapped in green tissue paper. She gives me the bras before my father gets home from work. She doesn’t want him to see them. Despite this, throughout the next week, I fidget with the edges of the bras so much that I’m sure he can tell. The tight fabric feels like it’s constraining my skin, like my back is being sucked into the hem.

A few years later, my sisters and I are standing in a hospital, getting an ultrasound of our hearts. I go first, because I’m the oldest, and I need to set a good example. The nurse tells me to remove

my shirt and bra, and leave the hospital gown open in the front. The gown is pale blue and paper-thin. It feels so flimsy that I'm sure picking it up will rip it in two, but somehow, it holds up. As the nurse leaves the room, my dad follows her, with an excuse about finding the bathroom.

My mother and sisters stay in the room with me. I turn away from them to change, and they don't have a problem with me being topless in the same room as them. But when my dad returns, he knocks, then peeks his head around the door, making sure I'm dressed before coming in.

I don't want to blame him for this, but I'm sure that he left the room because he's witnessed the sexualization of a woman's body before and doesn't want to associate that with his teenage daughter. He wants me to be his little girl forever, and I'm growing up too quickly for him.

While the doctor examines my heart, my dad watches Animal Planet on the TV on the opposite wall, trying so hard to avoid seeing my chest that he misses the projection of my heart.

III. All women have to get a period.

Every third year, my dad's side of the family has a huge family reunion. Because it's usually in Michigan, a good 6-hour drive, my family had never gone before. But this summer, the summer before I enter eighth grade, we have decided to make the long drive and meet our relatives, most of them for the first time.

On the last day of the three day reunion, the day we're supposed to leave, I wake up early, wanting to take a shower before we get back in the car. As I shower, I notice the water that runs down my legs is slightly orange.

That's weird, I think. I continue with my shower.

When I get out, I use the bathroom, then notice that the toilet paper is dark red. This confirms my suspicions: I just got my first period. In a hotel room, in Michigan, where I'm related to every single person in a two-mile radius, I have no idea what to do.

But I know what I don't want to do. I don't want to tell my mother, because I'm afraid she'll tell all my relatives, and they'll have a bad first impression of me.

So I do what any other scared thirteen-year-old would do. I don't say anything. I get in the car, like nothing happened, and sit there for six hours. We get home late, and I go right to sleep.

I don't tell my mother until the next morning, right before we're planning to go swimming. She makes less of a big deal than I thought she would, and tries to teach me how to use a tampon. I can't do it. It'll be another two years until I fully master the art of the tampon.

IV. All women have to change their last name.

I've heard the joke a million times: *Shouldn't your last name be Queen because you're a girl?*

The first time I saw a letter addressing my parents as "Mr. and Ms. Dale King," I was confused. I thought the company had gotten something wrong, or just made a typo. This was the first time I had been presented with the idea of a woman belonging to a man once they get married, almost as if they were one person. On that day, I vowed that I would never change my last name.

Every time I tell anyone, from friends to my own parents, that I don't want to change my last name, they usually roll their eyes and nod sarcastically. They act the same as they do when I say I don't want to get my ears pierced or I don't want to wear dresses.

I want to tell them that I'm not defying their views of femininity to make a statement. I'm not even doing it intentionally. When I was younger, I wished I was feminine. I wanted to like dresses and be hairless, but I felt uncomfortable in a body I felt I wasn't supposed to be in.

If I had been so confident when I was eleven and too scared to show my bare legs, I'm sure I could've convinced myself and Catherine that both of us are beautiful in our own bodies, even if we haven't learned to love them yet.