

READING

What Are You?

Canadian writer Anna Fitzpatrick reflects on how she relates to her grandfather and her family history:

As with any of my Poppy's stories, I had to press him to learn the details behind his tattoos. They were easy to miss, a muddled *s.d.* on his left forearm and an even shakier *s.p.* on his right, in faded ink that barely stood out against his weathered skin.

"They are my initials" was his answer the first time I asked him about them, when I was about eight. . . . "Satya Dev was the name I was born with," he said. "When I was a boy—eight or nine—a man with a business on the side of the road asked if I wanted to get my initials tattooed, and I thought, Why not? Not long after, my father changed my name to Satya Pal." He went and got those letters tattooed as well.

With each explanation came more questions. How did his father change his name? Was there a ceremony? A ritual? Did he tell him why he changed it?

"No. He just started calling me Satya Pal one day" . . .

My mother—Poppy's daughter—didn't even know the story behind his tattoos until I asked him in front of her. . . . Most people who knew him knew only the most basic details of his life: He left India in his 20s to work in England as a marine engineer, and met my Nana in a small English town. They moved to Calcutta, where my mom and her brothers were born, then emigrated to Canada, where I was born and have lived my entire life. . . .

Compared with my Poppy's childhood, mine was pretty dull. I grew up in a fairly multicultural neighborhood where having parents from a different place wasn't that big a deal. Sundays we would go to my grandparents' house and eat tandoori chicken and dal. There'd usually be an Indian movie playing on TV, but the only person watching would be my English grandmother. My mom took me to a Hindu temple once when I was very young, I suppose as a way to connect me to my culture. . . .

Physically, I don't look very Indian. My skin is light, with yellowish undertones. I have dark, bushy hair and eyebrows, and muddled blue eyes. From middle school on, curious classmates would ask, "So, what are you?"—the question that every mixed-race person is all too familiar with. I had a hard time answering. To call myself "brown" felt like a farce. I was born and raised in Canada.

My dad is white, and my mother is from India but has completely assimilated into Western culture. Claiming brownness felt like inserting myself into a culture that wasn't my own—and this was long before I knew what the word *appropriation* meant. Calling myself “white” felt equally wrong, like dipping a paintbrush into a pot of white paint and streaking it over our family portrait until it erased my Poppy's stories, my mom's childhood, and the family members lost during the violent partition of India in 1947, creating a blank slate onto which could be projected a picture of quintessential Caucasian girlhood.

So I usually answered “What are you?” with the simple, safe, monosyllabic “Mixed” . . .

As I got older, I started to read more about identity politics and became protective of—and sometimes defensive about—my Indian background. With a name like Fitzpatrick, I never had to explain to anybody that I had some Irish ancestors, despite the fact that the last one came three generations before me. It could be taken for granted that, as a light-skinned, English-speaking person living in Canada, I must have some European blood. But I felt like I had to almost prove my Indianness. “You don't look Indian,” said one girl in my eighth grade social studies class when I was working on a family-tree project, as if I was trying to dupe the class. . . .

I tried . . . to be “Indian.” I took my cues from Western movies with Indian characters, like *Bend It Like Beckham*. . . . I would look to my Indian friends, whose parents had immigrated later in their lives, and who still had a grasp on their parents' language, or practiced Hinduism. When I became a vegetarian, I started to cook more curries. I listened to popular Indian music and started teaching myself Hindi with books from the library. While I developed a genuine love for all these things, it still felt hollow to distill an entire culture down to food, music, and language, and my superficial knowledge of all three. Reading texts on Hinduism, or the history of India's independence, I felt like . . . an outsider . . .

My grandfather and I started talking all the time when I was in my late teens. . . . My understanding of India wasn't shaped by . . . songs on my iPod or the mutter paneer on my stove . . . but by the relationship I forged with a family member . . .

After Poppy died, I celebrated my 23rd birthday. . . . My aunt wanted to go to the Hindu temple [and she] took us to each shrine, explaining the importance of every deity. . . . *This is my history, this is my family, this is my identity*. But I couldn't feel it—not there in the temple.

Later that day, my brother drove my sister and me downtown and dropped us off in front of a tattoo parlor (“It's your birthday present,” my siblings explained). I showed the man behind the counter the . . . picture I had taken of my Poppy's forearms . . . [and] within moments I was sitting

in a leather chair, gripping my sister's hand, as the ink-filled needle scratched an *s.d.* and an *s.p.* into my own skin.¹

¹ Anna Fitzpatrick, "What Are You?" (June 13, 2013), *Rookie*, issue 22. Reproduced by permission of Anna Fitzpatrick.