

BY PAULA DERROW

It was the summer of my 11th year, and my hormones were raging. What I wanted most of all, besides a boyfriend, was to be allowed to shave my legs and underarms. I was rounder and bustier than nearly all of my bunkmates at the sleepaway camp where I spent July and August. Every morning, eight pairs of curious eyes scrutinized my burgeoning body as we scrambled into our shorts and tank tops. Finally, one still-scrawny girl dared to say what I suspected all of them were thinking: “Ew, your legs are *hair*y.” Another girl looked over, drawn to the unkind conversation as a shark is to blood in water, and added, “Your armpits are hairy, too.” Then they giggled, in unison.

“My mother won’t let me shave,” I said. “She says that if I do, the hair will grow back faster.” Mom meant well, I’m sure, but my humiliation that morning led to one of the first rebellious acts of my preadult years. Later that day, I borrowed a pink razor from a counselor, sequestered myself in the bathroom and ran the blade over the curves and gullies of my legs and armpits until I looked like all the other girls, protected from notice.

From then on, I shaved daily, a few quick swipes up above and down below. If I skipped a session, I felt stubbly, almost unclean, so I kept at it, the whole depilatory process as much a part of my routine as brushing my teeth.

Until I stopped cold, at *More’s* behest, nearly 40 years later. I happened to be in Rome, and my first thought was that I’d blend in with the locals, since I had the vague impression that Italians were kind of into hairy armpits and legs. “Oh no,” an American friend and longtime denizen of Rome corrected me. “The women here are crazy when it comes to grooming!” Still, the impossibly chic Italians didn’t seem to notice the slightly itchy curly brown hair that was beginning to peek out from under my sleeveless tops. But as I traversed the cobblestone streets, I felt less than well groomed, slightly icky, as if I had toilet paper stuck to my shoe.

My trip ended just as my armpits were becoming almost lush, about 18 days into the experiment. I had grown visible cushions of dark hair that made it tough to apply deodorant and caused me to take surreptitious sniffs throughout the day. My legs, on the other hand, were pristine. Now that I was 50, the leg-hair factory had shut down. I’d

never be teased for having hairy legs again, which actually made me a little sad.

Back in the States, I had dinner with two close friends. Would my furry armpits shock them? “Oh, so you’ve gone all Italian on us, eh?” my friend Carol said when I reached up to adjust an earring. I raised both arms high in the air, curious to see if I could elicit a stronger reaction. “Are you showing me your muscles?” Mia asked, looking bewildered. “No! My armpits!” I said.

“Not so bad,” Carol offered.

“Yeah, I don’t shave much in winter either,” Mia added.

The real test arrived the next night, with my husband just home from a trip. We dried the dishes and repaired to the bedroom where we were soon locked in an embrace. As I inhaled his familiar scent, I felt totally in the moment—except for the armpit thing. *When* would he notice? He just didn’t.

“*Look!*” I commanded, interrupting the action to raise my arms high.

“What?” he asked. “Do you have a rash or something?” I snapped on a light, practically shoving my armpits in his face. “Um, OK, so you didn’t shave?”

“Yes! I haven’t shaved for three weeks. My legs or my underarms!”

“Hmm,” he said, running a hand over my still-smooth-as-glass gams. “No hair there,” he said.

“I know,” I replied ruefully. “But what do you think about my armpits? Do you hate them?”

My husband turned off the light, ending the discussion with a kiss. When we came up for air, he said, “Darlin’, as long as the hair doesn’t get long enough to braid, I’m fine with it.”

I took a blade to my underarms the very next day. Gratified as I was by my husband’s reaction, I felt more feminine minus the curly black tendrils. Then I put the pink plastic razor down. Would I shave again tomorrow? Maybe not. Maybe next week. After all, I was decades past the catty meanness of 12-year-old girls. I had friends now, and a husband who loved me, hairy or not.

PAULA DERROW is a freelance writer and editor of the anthology *BEHIND THE BEDROOM DOOR*. She divides her time between New York City and Connecticut.