

# Living Proof

by Anne Castelino

*De part son identité ethnique et culturelle, l'auteure a toujours été définie comme étrangère. Pourtant, elle ne s'est jamais sentie de cette façon à cause de son identité lesbienne.*

I often get characterized as quiet and sweet and nice. It irritates me. Usually the people who say that about me are the ones who want to keep me that way.

When I was in residence at Victoria College and new to Canada, I had a semi-British/Indian accent that sounded polite but everyone valued language that was brash—with “attitude” I guess. “Outrageous” they said. “Brutal. Totally outrageous.” I would just say, “I had fun.” But that was not worth listening to. I had to hype it up to get heard. I had to work hard to get their attention. My form of resistance was to not work hard for them.

In the residence, whenever I had a beer at a party, Paula would come running up to me in front of everyone and say “Oh my God, Anne, you’re having a beer! Isn’t that against your religion?” I would answer, “But Paula, I’m a Christian like you.” She had a very bad memory. She would ask me that question again at every party for the next three years.

Now I know that this was not about my religion at all. She did not remember that I was Christian because she didn’t care to. She liked harassing me at parties is another possibility. She was concerned about a brown woman stepping out of what she thought should be my role. I think Paula needed me because she could only be free as long as I was there to be unfree.

I used to make a point of telling everyone that I was Indian just to enjoy watching their face muscles convulse, or to see if they would run a marathon away from me. I treated Canada as other on purpose. To my white housemates, of course, Indian meant Muslim—hence all that religion crap. If for one moment I put my beer down at the party, all the white women made a note that Anne was not drinking because of her religion. I swear I could have done cartwheels across the room and the beer would have hung in mid-air waiting for me—it had so much power.

After all, if I had a beer it was *in spite of* my religion. If I didn’t it was *because of* my religion. This takes the control away from me. I can’t actively (aggressively) choose to have or not have a drink. White women choose independently. But for me, there was no control or choice, everything depended on my religion.

Now, I am a lesbian *in spite of* my culture. But whenever I talk about homophobia in my family, or in India, I have a thousand vultures ready to tell me that it is *because of* the culture. When I tell South Asian women the same stories, they tell me it is *because of* my religion. (At least this time they get the right religion.)

I am no longer present. I am lost in all this.

Then they tell me, “Oh Anne, you’re so quiet.” But it is they who have decided who I am and why, no matter what I tell them. The statement itself silences. What am I supposed to say? “Oh yes. You are absolutely right. I *am* quiet. What fantastic observation skills you have!”

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