

A Perfect White Life

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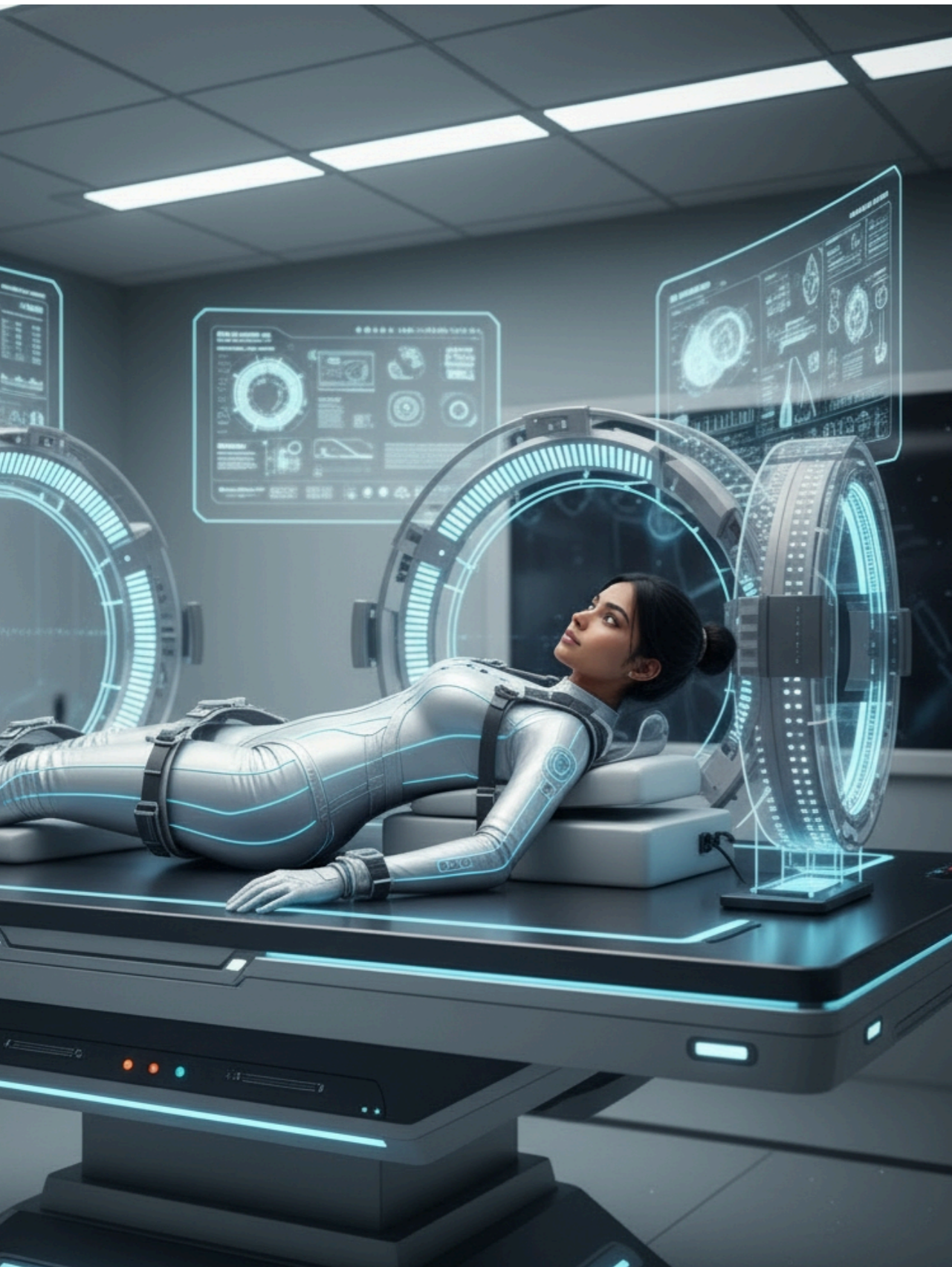


Gita Patil was a brilliant Indian scientist who'd left everything behind for America and the promise of cutting edge biotech research as a young girl. She had succeeded and now stood on the verge of something revolutionary. A technique that could rewrite adult DNA in seconds. Complete cellular transformation. Useful for medical as well as cosmetically purposes. The latter would probably be the biggest market.

And she was tempted to use it on herself.

Not out of vanity, but tired from a lifetime of quiet, grinding racism. The subtle dismissals, the assumptions, the way doors opened more easily for others. Part of her wanted to see what would happen if she could step into a new body, lighter, conventionally "beautiful". She would prove a point the world refused to see: that being brown had held her back from the beginning.

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The lab chamber door sealed behind her. She wore the silver bodysuit. Required protocol. She lay back and let herself relax as the machine positioned itself above her. The needle slid in. The substance entered her bloodstream.

Gita closed her eyes. The serum settled in her bloodstream. Soon she would be white, she thought with excitement. Soon they would finally listen. A smart, successful, beautiful white woman. She would soon have it all! She would be unstoppable! The visor above her flickered. She felt the shift in her skin first, a pale warmth washing out the brown undertone she'd carried all her life. Her hair tightened at the scalp, follicles rewiring, reshaping themselves. Her jaw tingled as the bones softened into a rounder, more delicate contour. *It's working*, she thought, a strange calm rippling through her. *It's finally—*

Then she felt a shift. A sudden slip in reality, as though the table had dropped out from under her.



She opened her eyes. Sure, her skin was creamy white and her hair was now lighter but something was off. No lab. Only a wooden living room with a small silver machinery that dissolved as she stood up. No hum of the bioreactors. The air smelled different, dustier, warmer, faintly sweet, like old wood and floor wax. television the size of a shoebox.

A lampshade glowed in the corner. A floral-print armchair sat by a television the size of a shoebox. A rotary phone. It looked like a movie from the 50s.

Her dress was now a mint-green cotton dress with tiny white dots, buttons marching neatly down her chest, the bodice pulled tight and sweetly structured, the skirt flaring out in that perfect mid-century silhouette. She could feel the stiff seams pressing into her ribs. Even the bow in her brown curled hair felt absurd.

Why did her outfit change too? And where the hell did the machinery go?

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She crossed the room, her medium high heels clicking on the polished floor as she slowly walked on them, and pulled back the heavy curtain.

The world outside was just what she'd expected at that point.

A sunlit street, that she recognized as the same where the lab stood, just in a very different time, before her company bought the whole block and turned it into a biotech research campus. Children running in loose circles, tossing a rubber ball, their laughter carrying lightly on the breeze.

And parked at the curb, gleaming like a showroom advertisement, sat a pristine Chevrolet Bel Air. A woman in her 40s stepped out of it, saw her and waved at her. Gita stood frozen. They knew her already! Who were these people, though?

She closed the curtains in a hurry and turned around.



The room swallowed her again. Warm light. Wooden panels. A lamp with a pleated shade casting a soft pool on the floor. Everything designed for a life she had never imagined for herself. She froze in front of the wall as the numbers finally sank in.

1954.

Not a misprint.

Her fingertips hovered over the paper, barely touching it. The texture was thick, slightly rough, the kind of stock no one had used in decades. The print wasn't digital, the ink was not laser print, the edges of the letters just a little soft from an old-fashioned press.

Her breath hitched. She leaned in closer, her curls brushing the page, and traced the neat little grid of days with one trembling finger. "Fifty... four," she whispered, voice rising in disbelief. "Oh no. No, no—this can't be real."



She stepped into the doorway, still gripping the knob as if she needed something solid to anchor herself. Her breath caught in her throat.

The kitchen was warm bathed in the soft yellow glow of a hanging lamp. It all smelled faintly of butter and something sweet cooling on the counter.

Then she saw them. A man in his late 30s or '40s, it was hard to tell given the old-fashioned way he was dressed, humming an old tune. Beside him, two children, both pale-skinned, bright-eyed, leaning over a mixing bowl, laughing. They looked up at her in the same instant. "Mommy?" The word hit her. The little boy grinned, flour dusting his cheeks. The girl waved a wooden spoon like a trophy. And the man, her "husband," apparently, smiled at her with the easy confidence of someone who'd loved her for years. "There you are, honey, your sister should be here soon!" he said. "Everything alright, Grace?" - he added, worried.

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Her children smiled at her, making her heart blush. "Oh God." She swallowed. "Am I really their mother?" A mother of two pretty white kids? She was a little happy about that. On the other hand, everything else was disheartening. She forced a smile, lifting a hand to her temple. "I'm quite alright," she said, surprised by her high-pitched voice. "I just feel a little faint all of a sudden. My nerves, I suppose." She hesitated, surprised at the wording, too. Then added lightly, "I thought I saw my sister through the window. If she comes in, would you tell her I've stepped away to change my dress?" Her husband straightened at once.

"Of course, sweetheart. You go lie down for a minute." His tone was gentle but paternalistic, patronizing. "It's probably that new typewriter you've been using at work. Too much strain, if you ask me. You really ought to be more careful." She turned away before her face could betray her. A typewriter?



The thought hit her. *Oh God. What was she? A writer? A journalist, maybe?* He gave her a reassuring nod. "I'll greet your sister." Then, with a small smile, almost indulgent: "Just don't be too long, alright? You know how she can go on once she gets started. You girls..."

She went back to the bedroom. What the hell is going on here? Why did she sound like an airhead? She tried recalling modern, technical words. To her shock, most of her vocabulary was gone. Blank. There was a memory of a machine with a flat TV screen, attached to a typewriter. She *knew* she had used it every day. "What was it called?" she whispered. The name refused to surface. Biology. She knew biology. Cells, chains, she pictured the spiral clearly. "What are you called?" she asked the thought, almost pleading. Nothing. Her head felt heavy. Slow. Like molasses. She wasn't a dumb girl, but her intellect had been dulled by years of low cerebral activity, away from school, with a dull job and with no stimulating reads or conversations.



She changed into a different dress, and went back out. Her sister was waiting in the living room. Older. Stiffer. Grace disliked her instantly. Mildred wasted no time as they left the house. Modern working women, she declared, were running themselves ragged. No wonder Grace looked pale. - this made Grace smile. - A woman's place was at home, like herself.

Grace nodded politely, lips tight. "And really," Mildred continued, lowering her voice, "you're terribly lucky. Such a gentleman, letting you work at all. But truly, he earns enough for all of you." "Times are changing, Mildred," Grace cut in. The chatter made her head ache. "Why don't we eat something instead?" She paused, then added, grasping for something—anything—familiar. "Perhaps Indian?" Mildred stared at her as though she'd spoken nonsense. "Indian?" she laughed. "Good heavens, Grace. We're not on a reservation!"



Over the next few days she found out the neighborhood she lived in was precisely the same where her biotech lab would one day be built, decades later. That was the only unchanged element in her life.

Her job, however, turned out to be very different. She was a secretary for an old lawyer who smoked cigars all day and barked orders. Her desk sat in the hallway so clients could see her the moment they walked in. The boss expected her to dress nicely, to smile at them, to greet them with a few melodic, high pitched chirps. She felt like brainless eye candy and what was worst was that it came naturally at her.

The typewriter was heavy and loud, the keys often jammed. Still, her fingers knew exactly what to do. Muscle memory, she thought. Somehow her brain and body were already adjusted to her new reality.

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Her only refuge was the church. She went alone, often staying after Mass when the pews emptied. A non-practicing Hindu turned into a devout evangelical Christian, what a joke fate had played on her. On the other hand, there were no Hindu temples within hundreds of miles.

She had dreamed of whiteness as freedom. Only now did she see the trap. White women had lived boxed in for generations, while she had once been free, educated, certain of herself. She still carried her memories, her sense of who she had been, but the woman she was becoming day after day was softer, dulled by her life. The distance between her old ambitions and this life hurt constantly.

So she prayed, not for escape, but for the strength to accept what she had become.