

opinion & CAMPUS LIFE

A CHILI PEPPER DREAM REALIZED

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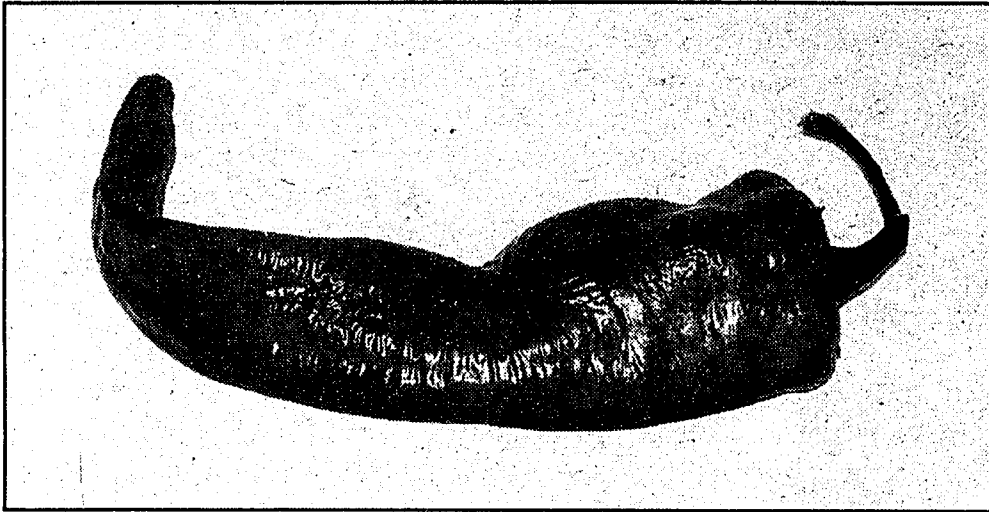


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For twenty-one years at Meredith, I was not a chili pepper. This fact burned me up, especially when I went once again, full of hope and confidence, to Ratemyprofessor.com and found that once again I had failed to meet the standards of a few of my colleagues at Meredith. I had seen them at faculty and committee meetings, in the dining hall, and at the Bee Hive, and, though I have excellent long-distance vision, I had noticed that these people are not hot. I could only guess that these faculty members had bribed their students or achieved their chili pepper status by some unsavory, secret methods—inflated grades, the assigning of only one paper per semester, or affecting a charming persona that I could not manage when the students' work was, well, not so hot.

Perhaps prejudice against the elderly was a factor, but then again, I was not a chili pepper prior to the millennium, and so I had to believe that perhaps I was fundamentally, deeply, not hot. I wouldn't have cared so much if I hadn't tried so hard. I kept up with the fashion trends and knew very well that this past summer was all about metallic—metallic sandals, metallic handbags, metallic hearts. I learned that dangly earrings were back—in fact, had been for about a year, according to two hotties who were experts on fashion trends. I bought one pair of low rise jeans. I understood the concept of the camisole with the bra inside, though I never figured out what we full-figured women were supposed to do about the bounce. I walked into and touched the bags at Coach, the jackets at J. Crew, the professionally cut suits at Ann Taylor, and the sassy fragrances at Banana Republic. On one or two occasions, I purchased a couple of items from these pricey stores. I hired a wardrobe consultant who informed me that I should never, in this life or the next, wear beige, and I obeyed. She recommended jewel colors, V-necks, and underwear that did not have the producer's name branded on the waistband. I followed orders, like the good trooper I am. I began, in my late fifties, to schedule two pedicures a year, one on Memorial Day weekend and one on Labor Day weekend, and I paid extra for the pumice stone, exfoliating creams, and tension-relieving massages in the electric chair. Last year I had my hair dyed and styled, for an indecent sum of money that would have financed a third-world family for a year. Guilty of self-indulgence, I upped my offerings to the church, but the radiance and beauty of this gesture did not extend to my outward appearance. I was still not a chili pepper.

I worked harder, creaming my face with anti-wrinkle products that cost more than my antacid products and nicotine lozenges put together. I bought some new lipstick, had my eyebrows waxed, and began to pay closer attention to the extra water weight I was carrying around. I sucked in my gut, squared my shoulders, bought some red shoes, coordinated some fascinating ensembles, creamed my feet, took long baths in anti-stress potions purchased from Whole Foods. Even on Fridays, when casual was okay, I wore some funky jewelry to offset the ten-year-old jeans and Birkenstocks with which I could not part. I bought some Burt's Bees lip gloss. I looked at all the fashion shots in Vogue and attempted a budget simulation of what I found there. Still no chili pepper.

I guess I should have been satisfied to have a happy face beside my name, but when I saw the other faculty members who had happy faces, I took little consolation from the simpering praise. But I took the chili pepper very, very seriously. My ego was at stake. If I were not a hottie, then how should I endure my remaining time on this earth? Students have no idea what it feels like to be publicly rated and found lacking. They are protected by the privacy act. I cannot say, when they come to class in bunny slippers, frayed T-shirts, and pajama bottoms, that these young women don't look so hot. I can't call their parents and say, "Do you know what your child is wearing today?" This fact ticks me off to no end. I would like to introduce on the Internet a site called Ratemystudents.com. Forget the academics. Scholarship is the least of my concerns. I just want to have my own scale for student chili pepper status. My standards would be low because I am a lot nicer than these students. My student rating would have minimum standards: if you do now or have ever combed your hair, you get one chili pepper. If you are wearing anything other than whatever you slept in, you get two chili peppers. If you are simply neat and clean, I would give you three chili peppers. If you are homely but sweet, you'd get four.

I grew old. I was weary. I had never won anything, not even a scratch-off for a free drink at a fast-food restaurant. I was pitiful, and my confidence was so shaken that I felt compelled to burst out at faculty meetings about trivial matters like academic integrity, high admissions standards, good leadership. These were just the wild ramblings of a resentful old woman whose priorities were appropriately superficial. I wanted a chili pepper, please, or I swore I would wear my sweat pants to class every single day—and damn the consequences.

Well, I checked the ratings this week, and guess what? Somebody out there thinks I'm a hottie. I don't know when the chili pepper appeared, but since I am sixty-two, I have to believe that the chili pepper was a sympathy vote, offered up by some Napoleon Dynamite to Pedro, who is running for class president and destined to lose. So thanks, whoever you are, for boosting my morale, even though I know that the chili pepper is sort of a consolation prize from somebody who feels sorry for me. Still, I am feeling empowered. Now I want more chili peppers, enough to make up for all the years I waited. Glamour corrupts, after all, and absolute glamour corrupts absolutely. ■

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her mind on decisions she has made, but at least she takes a stance on issues. In contrast, Obama has missed two hundred and ninety-three votes in this Congress alone (www.projects.washingtonpost.com). My guess is that he just does not want to take a stance on a whole lot of issues so that people cannot hold him accountable for what he believes in.

Palin, like McCain, supports offshore drilling, and for you Democrats out there, how do you expect to get the price of gas down without offshore drilling? Obama and most of the Democrats in Congress want Americans to invest in hybrid cars and alternative energy uses, but let's be honest with ourselves, with hybrid cars and something as simple as putting solar paneling on homes is

so expensive. People cannot afford to use the alternative uses of energy because of the high prices of those alternative sources, and I do not see all the Democrats in Congress being the first to stand up and get rid of their gas powered cars.

Senator John McCain picked the right candidate for vice president. Senator Barack Obama is just mad because his campaign team was not savvy enough to think about the consequences of not picking Senator Hillary Clinton for his vice president. Obama and the rest of the Democratic Party, I think, are stunned at McCain's pick and did not see this coming. Frankly, I think the Democrats are a little scared that the Republicans might win the election in November. ■