

By Dinah Cardin
Lice Touch

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A recent dinner at a Japanese restaurant (noooo, not sushi) stirred an old fascination with chopsticks. Come on, who doesn't have a chopstick fetish? I've always admired the sleek and delicate nature of chopsticks - the way they never splinter, never injure while you balance and eat the tiniest grains of rice.

But I recently put my finger on their exact allure. It's their staggering resemblance to the sticks used at the yearly lice check toward the beginning of each school year.

It must have been one of my first conscious awakenings of the sensual.

Oh, take me back to that hot red light focusing down on the crown of the head and those sticks moving over the follicles, lightly caressing the scalp, the nurse breathing down and 25 pairs of the little eyes of your classmates watching.

Whether crafted from bamboo or high grade plastic, the chopsticks slide across the skin and through the scalp with spine tingling precision. Needless to say, the sticks came home from the restaurant. Now, every day can be lice check day.

But back then, all too often the nurse would quickly dismiss you as lice free, which wasn't fair. What about a little to the left? Was she profiling? Did I look too clean and tidy to be lice infested? I used someone's hair brush only half an hour ago, lady. Check again, for God's sake!

It was by far the best part about being an elementary school student, save the glorious act of standing in line and actually watching it. Maybe standing third or fourth away from the hot seat, spying the sticks slow graceful movement over greasy shoulder length locks and the skillful navigation through thick braids.

This was voyeurism at its best. Simply knowing you would be experiencing this bliss, this warm tingly insect check, in only a matter of minutes, was nearly too much. This led to my inquiry if the lice check still happens in the same way, or have they hyped it up with some laser that needn't touch. Don't tell me lice have completely vanished from the modern day public school room, thanks to the removal of the carpeted reading nook, the den of breeding it always was.

Has the message not to share hair brushes finally come across to today's students, with their unquestioning minds. Hey, where's your spunk, kids? Don't they know the Popsicle stick sensations their obedience is costing them?

As kids and parents prepare to buy the jumbo Crayola 100-pack and another plastic lunchbox featuring a violent cartoon, aren't the dog days of summer just the time to begin thinking about this?

You, head nurse of your supposed insect-free sterile institution, put on your paper hat, grab your search light. It's nit patrol! Look closely, lest you leave those louse eggs where they're deposited.

According to the Needham-based National Pediculosis Association, the only non-profit organization dedicated to head lice prevention, the ritual still takes place in many schools, though many institutions no longer make it the priority they once did. Instead, they wait until a child is crazed with the itch, which often leads to a whole classroom of squirmy 1st graders scratching their heads in wonderment.

The organization operates a Website called Headlice.Org, which is the first site you'll come to if you enter "head lice" into any of the five major search engines, including Google. There, school nurses, administrators and parents can find all kinds of information. There are free critter cards available for identifying the bugs and a hotline for baffled parents in need of some support as they boil the bed sheets and vacuum the dog in the middle of the night.

As far as the kids are concerned, the lice screening isn't particularly lousy in the scheme of a trying school day, according to Jane Cotter, the organization's operations manager. "It kind of tickles somewhat," she says, "And gives them a chance to get out of class." Ohhhh ... And so much more.