

“Written with tender sensitivity and wild wit, these wonderful essays examine the allure, magic, curse, thrills, and sorrows of hair.” —LUANNE RICE, author of *The Lemon Orchard*



ME, MY HAIR, AND I

*Twenty-seven Women
Untangle an Obsession*



edited by

**ELIZABETH
BENEDICT**

Editor of the *New York Times*
bestseller *What My Mother Gave Me*



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ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL 2015

also by ELIZABETH BENEDICT

The Practice of Deceit

Almost

Safe Conduct

The Beginner's Book of Dreams

Slow Dancing

The Joy of Writing Sex: A Guide for Fiction Writers

Editor

What My Mother Gave Me: Thirty-one Women on the Gifts That Mattered Most
Mentors, Muses & Monsters: 30 Writers on the People Who Changed Their Lives

“To be born woman is to know—

~~Although they do not talk of it at school—~~

That we must labour to be beautiful.”

—W. B. YEATS, “Adam’s Curse”

Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten?

—MAYA ANGELOU, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

It’s like the medical field. Aside from people being born and dying, women will spend their last dime to get their hair done, so I’ll always have a job.

—SAHARA, a student at the Beauty Schools of America, Miami Beach, Florida, on why she’s chosen to be a hairstylist

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It's impossible to sufficiently thank the writers who've shared their deepest feelings about their families, their spouses, their children, their cultures, their religions, their illnesses, and, oh, yes, their hair! in these scintillating essays. I hope this is just the start of a long public conversation about what we all talk about when we talk about hair—because we talk about everything: politics, passion, motherhood, mortality, vanity, self-doubt, self-loathing, self-esteem, rebirth, regeneration, and, occasionally, the deep pleasure of a really great haircut.

Hairwise and otherwise, I'm grateful to my sister, Nancy Neiditz, who once delivered a comedy lecture at a posh New York restaurant—pointing out women around the dining room—on the immutable desirability of straight hair, which had everyone at our table doubled over in laughter, especially those with curly hair. Her devotion to her own hair puts me to shame. I'm immensely grateful for the company and inspiration of my niece Julia Smith, who wears her hair very short and no longer bright green; to my stepdaughter, Emily Daggett Smith, who wears her long hair with style and elegance; and to my husband, James Smith, who puts up with my tangled, sometimes Phyllis Diller-like tresses with great good humor. Best of all, on those occasions when I get my hair done, I get notices.

INTRODUCTION

ASK A WOMAN about her hair, and she just might tell you the story of her life.

Ask a whole bunch of women, and if *Me, My Hair, and I* is any indication, you could get a history of the world: reflections and revelations about family, race, religion, ritual, culture, politics, celebrities, what goes on in African American kitchens and at Hindu Bengali weddings in Calcutta, alongside stories about the influence of Jackie Kennedy, Angela Davis, Lena Horne, Madonna, Audrey Hepburn, Shirley Temple, Sandra Dee, Joan Baez, Farrah Fawcett, Kelly McGillis, Judith Butler, the Grateful Dead, and Botticelli's Venus.

What's abundantly clear in all these personal stories is that hair matters. Many other facts of life matter too, oftentimes more than hair (illness, poverty, war, famine, flood, and sometimes shoes and makeup), but hair can be counted on to matter just about every day, at least to a high percentage of women—and to more than a few men, at least back in the day. The Beatles' long hair, when it first shimmied and shook on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, in time to "I Want to Hold Your Hand," changed the course of social history. Way before that, the Old Testament's Samson believed that his hair, seven braids' worth, was the source of his strength, and his enemies hired the temptress Delilah to cut it off.

As I read and reflect on these essays, I'm struck by just how much hair matters to so many of us, and by the tangled intricacies of why. Why so much? And why with this intensity?

"A woman's hair is her glory," Maya Angelou explains in *Good Hair*, Chris Rock's documentary about African American women and their hair. But long before it has a chance to acquire glory in our lives, it demands attention and care. It's an early life lesson in basic grooming, a public window into the private household. In social science terms, hair is a signifier. One of the earliest signals it transmits, when we're kids, is whether we are being looked after properly. A child's unkempt hair invites scrutiny, condemnation, and, if it's really a mess day after day, maybe a visit from Child Protective Services. As girls grow up and learn to groom their own hair, they learn to take care of themselves. When they have daughters, they groom them too, and so the cycle continues. Along the way, we learn that the hair choices we make for ourselves and others reveal who we are, the worlds we live in, and how we want to be perceived.

For women, hair is an entire library of information, about status, class, self-image, desire, sexuality, values, and even mental health. For many of the years I lived in Washington, DC, in the 1980s, I remember frequently seeing a woman with gnarled, matted hair that stood a foot off her scalp. She was protesting—I think it was nuclear war—on the sidewalk outside the White House. While I shared her views on nuclear war, the state of her hair told me that she was not entirely well. I can summon her face vividly, but I know the reason I always noticed her was the house of hair atop her head.

Hair matters because it's always *around*, framing our faces, growing in, falling out, getting frizzed

changing colors—in short, demanding our attention: Comb me! Wash me! Relax me! Color me! It's always *there*, conveying messages about who we are and what we want. Invite me to the prom! Love me! Hire me! Sleep with me! Don't even think about sleeping with me! Take me seriously! Marry me! Mistake me—please!—for a much-younger woman!

It's always there, unless it's gone or it's hidden—and those absences tell stories too. A common one involves the ravages of chemotherapy; missing hair is evidence of illness. Then there are cultures where women shave off their hair and cover their heads, and other cultures where women may keep their hair, but their heads must be shrouded in veils, sometimes with only slits or screens through which to see. Why the shaved heads? Why the draperies? There are many reasons and many interpretations, depending on one's relationship to the veils. Covering the hair signifies membership to insiders and outsiders, in a specific group; it's a quick self-identifier. It may remind members of the group how to worship and to behave. It focuses attention on the face, not the secondary characteristics. And shaving or hiding the hair fundamentally nullifies hair's ornamental, aesthetic, and sexual properties, thereby sending unambiguous messages about the women's availability and independence. Finally, there's the hair that's almost always hidden from view—but that has crept into public conversations in the past two decades, as Brazilian waxes, dyes, bleaches, and other grooming gimmicks have made achieving childlike genitals the new normal.

Not surprisingly, there seems to be a hair story in the news just about every day, and because we live in the twenty-first century, most of these stories then leap to Twitter, Facebook, and TMZ, and the heavens knows where else. Before long, the whole world—or just a few thousand people—is debating Jennifer Aniston's layers, Michelle Obama's bangs, the toxins in hair dyes, the Duchess of Cambridge's teasing her husband about his bald spot, a movie star on a TMI jag about her pubic hair, a child expelled from school for a hairstyle, an Olympic gymnast condemned for her kinky hair, and the US Army's issuing new rules about which hairstyles are permitted and which are not. News stories about hair run the gamut from pop-culture fluff to ethnic and racial hot buttons, and the hottest of those often involve African Americans and their tresses. If we're black, we know the landscape of this territory intimately. If we're not, we may be oblivious to the very separate world of African American hair, an issue so complex and charged that it's been the subject of dozens of books—histories, self-help, and photo essays. Long before *Good Hair*, Maya Angelou told her own hair history in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and in his autobiography, Malcolm X describes his introduction to getting his hair straightened into a “conk,” using lye, eggs, and potatoes, and later his condemnation of this brutal technique.

In African American culture, “good hair” is smooth and soft. For many of the other contributors, “good hair” is also the straight hair that they don't have naturally and always wanted. As all unhappy families are different in their own ways, each story here of a woman at war with her hair is unique. Fortunately, not all contributors have had such adversarial relationships, though family conflict and connection were often acted out through the writers' hair and the locks of other family members.

While it's easy to make light of our obsession with our hair, very few of the writers in these pages do

that. We get that hair is serious. It's our glory, our nemesis, our history, our sexuality, our religion, our vanity, our joy, and our mortality. It's true that there are many things in life that matter more than hair, but few that matter in quite these complicated, energizing, and interconnected ways. As near as we can tell, that's the long and short of it.



The Rapunzel Complex

REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN

I've never figured out how to tell the story of my life. But I do think I can tell the story of my hair.

My hair grew up in the shadow of my older sister's hair, which was long and golden and spilled beautiful natural curls onto her shoulders. My hair was also light but always described as dirty blonde, which led to confusion. I was never able to get across to my mother why she so often found me in the upstairs bathroom, taking a bar of Ivory soap to my hair and scrubbing. If I'd belonged to a different kind of family, neuroses might have been suspected and I might have been taken to a therapist.

Even more than clean hair, I wanted long hair. But my mother was tired by the time my youngest sister and I were born. There were twelve years between the oldest of my siblings and the youngest, who was born after a large gap. It was as if there were two different sets, the older children my mother took pleasure in and then the pair of us, Sarah and I, both with short hair. I must really have wanted long hair to have raised the issue with my mother at all. She was short tempered when she responded that my hair was too thick to be grown long. Untangling it would only add to the burdens of her life. In my mind, my hair's thickness was connected with its dirtiness, making the contrast between my older sister's tresses of glory and my own ugly hair even greater. My mother cut my too-thick locks, and since she didn't want to have to do it often, my hair was cut very short, shorter even than Sarah's. The last part of the ordeal was my father's running his electric shaver over the back of my neck to clear away the stubble. I hated the pinching feel of that electric shaver, and I hated my boy cuts.

As soon as I gained autonomy over my own head, I grew my hair with utter abandon. In college it was so long that I could sit on it. Sarah also grew her hair long, and this being the late sixties, we took turns ironing each other's tresses to suppress any bourgeois pro-war tendencies toward curling. One day when I was lying with my head in the hands of my sister, I heard her say in a frightened voice, "Something's gone wrong." The stench reached me almost simultaneously with Sarah's words. She neglected to turn down the heat setting. A wad of scorched hair was melded to the reeking iron. Once again, I had to cut my hair short, but by the time I got my PhD, it was hippie-long again.

When I got my first job teaching philosophy, I was twenty-six and looked far younger. The students always seemed a bit confused the first day of class when I strode to the front of the room to talk in command. Their skepticism intensified my own sense of absurdity at having my words dutifully

written down by smart Barnard women. Who was I to be accorded such status? Perhaps a sophisticated haircut would convince us all of my authority. I asked around and was given the name of the salon said to be the best in Manhattan. Kenneth, I was told, had created Jacqueline Kennedy's bouffant hairdo. I took my hair to Kenneth's, and though I didn't receive the attentions of the celebrated hairdresser himself, still I could tell this was a dauntingly classy establishment. I had overreached myself in trying to do justice to my hair and was unprepared to resist the professional argument authoritatively delivered, to the effect that my hair must, simply must, be cut far shorter than I anticipated. I watched it pile up on the floor, afraid to raise my eyes to the mirror. When I finally did, the look on my face prompted the hairdresser to ask me whether "philosophy majors" ever cry. Damn it, I wanted to tell him. I'm not a philosophy major. I'm a philosophy professor! A professor! That's the only reason I'm sitting here with all my hair lying detached from my head only to become garbage on your pricey floor!

Since that learning experience at Kenneth's, I have tried never to betray my hair. As a child I already knew that I possessed long hair that was trapped inside a short cut. I also figured out, as I got older, that I was a freethinker trapped within Orthodox Judaism, a feminist trapped in paternalism, a novelist trapped in the rules of my own rigorous academic discipline. My hair's struggles have been many struggles.

I kept it long, but there were still mistakes to be made along the way. A hairdresser once made the argument that at my age—I had just turned forty—women look better, which is to say younger, as redheads. As a philosopher I'm trained to spot the fallacies in arguments, but somehow I was duped by this one. I was going to have to see this hairdresser every eight weeks in order for my roots to be attended to. By about the third session, I caught on and went back to my natural color. I was buried under obligations. Not only did I teach now, but I was writing novels. And I had two daughters, both of whom had long, long hair. I didn't have time for hair salon appointments every eight weeks. Anyway, I wasn't any redhead.

My children brought their own pressures to bear on my hair. At around the age of ten, my oldest daughter became acutely embarrassed by the look I had evolved. I looked nothing like the other mothers in our suburban New Jersey community. She begged me to never wear my army boots when I picked her up from school, and this being the eighties, she begged me to get a perm. I remembered my own acute embarrassment prompted by my own mother, who, as an Orthodox woman, looked nothing like the chic women of White Plains, New York, where I'd grown up. All of them were slim and tan and tanned. They seemed to have tennis rackets growing out of their hands, where my mother had a spatula (which I believed to be a Yiddish word). And so, remembering, I took my daughter's embarrassment to heart. It took about six months for that awful perm to grow out.

Her younger sister, a nonconformist from an early age, complained about my looks only once. I came to pick her up at the end of her summer program, run each year by Johns Hopkins University. My marriage had recently broken up, and I'd decided to update my look. I was wearing a stylish, sleeveless black dress, and I'd added highlights to my hair that had finally lifted it out of the category

of dirty blond. My daughter took one look at me and said, in the perfected disdain of her fifteen years, “Now you look just like all the other mothers of the preppies up here. Are you in training to become trophy wife?” She was in a mood to draw blood, which I acknowledged and respected, but still couldn’t help bursting out in laughter. I’d just turned fifty. Some trophy.

The beautiful golden hair of my older sister had gone through its own life story. She’d remained Orthodox, and in her circle she was supposed to wear a wig, or at least to keep her hair covered beneath a kerchief or a hat. But Mynda had resisted. Her hair had always been her glory. She resisted death with the same spirit. Lying in the hospital only days before the end, she asked me to comb her hair. Although it had pitifully thinned, it was still there, lying spread out on her shoulders; and that itself seemed a triumph. We joked that vanity would be the last thing in either of us to go. My beautiful sister.

My hair has partaken in the high points of my life. A reviewer in the *London Times* once referred to me as “the American philosopher-novelist who looks like Rapunzel but thinks like Wittgenstein.” That was nice. And when I was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, I was seated next to the novelist Alison Lurie. At the close of the ceremony my partner, Steven Pinker, approached us, and I pointed him out to Alison. She gave him a long, appraising look. “Good hair” was her verdict. Then she gave me the same once-over. “You too,” she said. “You’re the good-hair couple,” she pronounced. Worse things have been said about both of us.

My hair is still long, no doubt inappropriately so for my age, but I am perhaps also of an age when no one dares—or cares—to say such a thing to me anymore. I’ve kept the highlights too, and they mask the gray that comes in around the temples during the long stretches in between my salon visits. Nobody will ever convince me again to do anything with my hair but what I want. My hair and I have grown into ourselves and know what we’re about.

The only one who ever has any hair suggestion to make is Steve. When I tell him that I’m off to the salon for one of my rare trims, he never fails to admonish, “Don’t let them cut too much off. I love your hair long.” Which, for the story of my hair, and now his, is another way of saying, And they live happily ever after.



Hair, Interrupted

SULEIKA JAOUAD

For as long as I can remember I've felt like an outsider looking in. Between the ages of four and eighteen, I

attended six schools on three continents. As the child of two immigrants—my mother is Swiss and my father is Tunisian—I discovered that my multicultural background was anything but “cool” or “exotic” to my classmates. Roll call on the first day of school was like showing up to class wearing underwear on the outside of my jeans. With a name as unpronounceable as Suleika Jaouad, I found it hard to blend in. Sometimes that made me want to blend in all the more.

Even my lunch box was a source of embarrassment. All I wanted back then was a brown paper bag filled with typical, all-American fare: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Snackables, Pop-Tarts, and Gushers. Was that too much to ask for? I remember bursting through the door after school in a hurry one day. “Never, ever pack me chicken tagine for lunch again,” I said. The contrast between the smelly, coagulated orange mess of chicken and the pristine, odorless beauty of a Pop-Tart had never felt sharper.

Over time, the embarrassment of being the perpetual new kid hardened into resentment. I resented that my family had a French-only language policy at home. I resented that I had a multisyllabic name and that I was too young to legally change it to something more normal like Ashley or Jessica. And I resented that my mother, an artist with a flair for the eccentric and a sturdy sense of who she was and what she believed, seemed to think it was so easy to be comfortable with not always fitting in. “You are unique,” she would tell me, forgetting that the word is a social albatross when you're a kid. I was mortified the day she came to pick me up at the bus stop wearing cross-country skis, a fluorescent yellow parka, and a backward baseball cap covering her spiky two-inch-long hairdo. *Quelle horreur!*

When I got to middle school and my family settled in upstate New York, I dreamed of having golden, waist-length Rapunzel-like tresses—like the popular girls on the cheerleading squad—instead of my frizzy, shoulder-length auburn hair. I tried everything. They knew me in the hair product aisle at the local CVS pharmacy, but no amount of roasting my hair with Sun-In or dousing it in Long 'n' Strong could make me look like *them*. In the sixth grade, I even persuaded my mother to let me get a braided blond weave (hello, fashion police!).

These were the memories that came rushing back to me on a muggy spring afternoon in May 2011, the age of twenty-two. Nothing of note was happening in the news that day. But the world that I knew was about to implode.

“PRECAUTIONARY” WAS THE word the doctor had used. He was talking about the bone marrow biopsy I had undergone a few days before, a fairly painful, invasive procedure that is rarely performed on young people. After two months of flu-like symptoms that seemed resistant to the strongest antibiotics, it had been the next step. My skin had become so pale it looked almost translucent. “Robin’s egg blue, as if all of the veins have floated to the surface of my skin,” was how I described it in my journal. Something was wrong. This much I knew. But the doctor reassured me that he didn’t expect to find anything abnormal in my bone marrow.

By the time my parents and I arrived at the clinic to hear the results of the biopsy, it was dusk. All of the staff and the other patients had gone for the day. The lights in the waiting room had been dimmed, casting an ominous shadow on the beige walls and stacks of outdated magazines. The doctor didn’t mince words. “You have something called acute myeloid leukemia,” he said, enunciating the diagnosis like a foreign-language teacher instructing us in the pronunciation of a new vocabulary word. “We need to act fast.”

A lot of people have asked me what it was like to hear that I had cancer at such a young age. What is the appropriate reaction to one’s own cancer diagnosis? Are you supposed to break down in tears, faint, or scream?

I did not do any of those things. Instead, I froze and repeated the word over and over in my head. *Loo-kee-mee-ah. Loo-kee-mee-ah. Loo-kee-mee-ah.* It sounded like an exotic flower.

It was my next reaction, however, that really surprised me. “Am I going to lose all my hair?” I blurted out to the doctor.

On balance, since I had just been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, worrying about hair loss seemed petty and irrelevant, even narcissistic. But a bald head—the signature side effect of chemotherapy—was one of the few tropes that I knew about cancer. I needed to reassure myself by asking questions that were within the realm of my understanding. A question like, What’s going to happen to me? could have lethal and terrifyingly unforeseeable consequences. My doctor confirmed that the chemo would take my hair as its prize, within a week or so of starting treatment.

CHEMOTHERAPY IS A take-no-prisoners stylist. The thing that no one tells you when you lose your hair during chemo is that it doesn’t happen all at once. The first evidence that mine was falling out appeared on my pillow: a mess of stray hairs spread across the fabric like a furry Jackson Pollock painting. Then, over the next few days, it started to come out in clumps. Finally, when only a few patches of hair were left on my head, I yanked the rest of it out with my bare hands. I felt like a gardener, pulling weeds from damp soil.

Within a few weeks, I could no longer recognize the person staring back at me in the mirror. Gaunt cheeks. Bald head. No eyebrows. No eyelashes. Skin as dry and white as chalk. And a waist that

quickly shrank from a healthy size 6 to a 00. But what hurt most were the silent, invisible side effects of my disease. The isolation. The friends who stopped returning my calls after I got sick. The fear of dying before I had really begun to live my life. And perhaps worst of all, coming to terms with the reality that the chemotherapy had rendered me permanently infertile. Just like that, my life had split into two: there was Suleika BC (before cancer) and Suleika AC (after cancer)—and that's if luck was on my side.

For the most part, my transformation had taken place within the privacy of the four walls of my hospital room. I could avoid the mirror hanging on the bathroom wall, but when I left the hospital for short breaks in between treatments, I couldn't shield myself from the stares of curious strangers. Everywhere I went, cancer spoke for me before I could speak for myself. I tried hiding beneath hats and head scarves and wigs, but they only made me feel like more of an impostor.

One night, I made the mistake of going to a friend's party. It was my first time seeing many of my old college friends since my diagnosis. As I walked through the door, it felt like the music had suddenly gone dead. I could feel everyone's eyes glued to my bald head and to the tubes of my catheter protruding above my right breast. When I made eye contact with people, some quickly looked away. Conversations were awkward as acquaintances stared at their shoes or quickly excused themselves to make another drink or to go to the bathroom. A few minutes later, I told my friends I needed some fresh air. I jumped into a cab, hot, inky tears streaming down my face as I gave the driver directions to take me home.

My mom sat on the edge of my bed rubbing my back with the palms of her hands as I cried myself to sleep that night. I wanted my old life back, and I missed the way I had looked before. While my current situation was entirely unfamiliar territory for me, the feeling of wishing that I were in a different body—that I looked more similar to those around me—harked back to the way I had felt about myself in middle school. Now, however, I had a different perspective on the "outsider complex" of my youth. I was angry at the teenage version of myself, for nitpicking over the color and texture of my hair, when now I had no hair at all.

ALMOST A YEAR after my diagnosis, with three inches of freshly grown baby hair covering my head, I prepared for the most difficult chapter of my cancer treatment yet: a risky bone marrow transplant that would be my only shot at a cure. My doctors told me point-blank that I had a 35 percent chance of surviving the procedure. The odds were stacked against me. Surrounded by so much uncertainty, I began to search for the things that I *could* control. I realized that the outward significance of cancer could only define me if I allowed them to. I became determined to enter the transplant unit looking and feeling like Suleika, and not just an anonymous cancer patient.

Growing up, I had always wanted to wear the coveted cheerleader uniform. To be a girly girl. But I didn't want that anymore. I needed to look inward and to figure out what my own uniform was going to be. I adopted a brown leather jacket lent to me by my best friend, Lizzie. Boots with spikes on the heel staring at me in the store window? I'll take them. The final piece of my new look fell into place just five days before I was scheduled to enter the bone marrow transplant unit. I went to Astor Place

Hairstylists, a cavernous basement barbershop in downtown Manhattan, known for its famously low prices, multilingual barbers, star-studded clientele, and no-nonsense customer service. I wanted to get a simple buzz cut, a preemptive strike against the chemo that would soon make my hair fall out for the second time.

When I explained my situation to my barber, Miguel Lora, he suggested I take the buzz cut one step further by getting “hair tattoos.” The idea of a tattoo scared me at first, but Miguel reassured me that he would simply use his clippers to groove a spiral design in the half-inch layer of hair that remained. “What the hell,” I said. After all, I had little left to lose. My new style made me look like I was tough even when I didn’t always feel that way. I was adding armor, and I liked the way it fit.

As I walked out onto the street, a construction worker whistled at me. “Cool hair!” he shouted out. It was the first time since my diagnosis that someone had made a remark on my appearance that wasn’t cancer related.

WHILE CANCER MAY not be a choice, both style and attitude are. I wish I could have told that to my fifteen-year-old self. Trying to make my unruly brown locks blond back then was as futile an effort as trying to pretend that I had hair after my chemotherapy. I would never go so far as to call cancer a gift. After all, I would never give it to you for your birthday. But I would call it a teacher. My disease has taught me that I can far more effectively take control of my look by embracing it and having fun with it, rather than forcibly trying to make it something it is not. This approach toward my outward appearance extends into a larger lesson: no matter what life hurls your way, the best way to face a challenge is to lean into it and to make it your own.

Eventually, my hair would slowly start to grow back. As soon as it was long enough, I went to see Miguel for more hair tattoos. I shared photographs of my new hairstyle on social media, and within a few months, several other young cancer patients had gone to see Miguel to get their own hair tattoos. The tattoos had shown us a new way to have fun with the hair that we had—or that we didn’t have—and given us a newfound confidence in our own skin.

I survived the bone marrow transplant. With each day, I’m getting stronger and healthier. And in the time since then, I’ve come to appreciate the benefits of sticking out in a crowd, even though I don’t always seek out the circumstances. Today my hair is about two inches long, short and spiky just like my mother’s. When people tell me how much we look alike, I smile and thank them for the compliment. I’m still a long way from having waist-length Rapunzel tresses. But the funny thing is, I don’t want them anymore. Short hair is starting to grow on me.



My Black Hair

MARITA GOLDEN

If you are a Black woman, hair is serious business. Your hair is considered by many the definitive statement about who you are, who you think you are, and who you want to be. Long, thick, straight hair has for generations been considered a down payment on the American Dream. “Nappy” hair, although now accepted in its myriad forms, from the natural to twists and locks, has long been and remains a kind of bounced check on the acquisition of benefits of that same enduring cultural mythology. Like everything else about Black folk, Black people’s—and especially Black women’s—hair is knotted and gnarled by issues of race, politics, history, and pride.

Who would think that the family kitchen would double as a torture chamber? We think of the kitchen as the locus of nourishment, satisfaction, and family good times. But for generations of young Black girls, the family kitchen was associated with pain and fear, tears and dread. The kitchen was where, as a young girl, I got my hair “straightened.” My coarse, sometimes called “kinky” or “nappy,” hair, which was considered “bad” hair, got straightened with an iron comb that had been heated over a burner on the stove. It was made straight, as in no longer coarse, crooked, or “bad.” Straight, as in the admonition I often heard shouted at children who were misbehaving, “Straighten yourself out!” Ironically, “the kitchen” was also the name for the patch of unruly hair at the nape of the neck that was often most resistant to the magic of the hot comb.

Our kitchen in Washington, DC, smelled of smoke, burned hair, and Dixie Peach hair pomade applied with my mother’s fingers onto my scalp. Sometimes the “hot comb” was dipped into the hair pomade and then applied to my hair. My mother, like so many mothers, thought this was an art or science, but in reality it was haphazard, even dangerous work when performed by amateurs. The result of this laborious and often, for me, degrading ritual was straight hair but burned ears, necklines, forehead, and scalp—all in the quest for what we called then, and many still call, “good hair.”

I remember hating the every-two-week ordeal, or sometimes even more often, if a “touch-up” was required. Maybe my hair got wet in the rain, maybe I sweated too much playing outside, maybe, God forbid, I went swimming without a swim cap, and then we were back to square one. Back to that awful, horrible place where my hair was on my head in its natural state, not hurting me or anybody else, but coarse, tightly curled, and, to the eyes of so many around me, unacceptable. The process of losing the straightness of the hot comb was even called “going back.” I got the message early on. I was not to face the world until my hair looked as near as it could to “good hair,” also known as “White girl

hair.” Is it any wonder that I soon developed the habit of standing in front of my mother’s gilt-edged mirror with her silk scarves pinned on my head and imagining that those scarves were my real hair and that I had been transformed into Cinderella *and* Snow White? I spent countless hours alone in front of that mirror, hypnotized by what I wished for and what my imagination had made real. To have a White girl’s hair.

What happened to me in my mother’s kitchen was part of the generations-old tradition and requirement in the Black community. For women and men to be accepted by and successful in both the Black and the White worlds, we had to look, either through hair texture, skin color, or phenotype like Whites. Of the three, hair texture has always been the easiest to change.

Today, as Black women in America spend half a trillion dollars a year on weaves, wigs, braids, and relaxers, that 1950s fantasy lives on for new generations of Black women, who can now simply, easily, and cheaply buy what I wished for back then. Little Black girls still get the message that their hair needs to be tamed, but they don’t wince and shrink as the hot comb nears their heads. As early as four or five years old, they are forced to endure “relaxers,” a process in which harsh chemicals applied to their natural hair do what the hot comb did for me. And their tender young hair may not be strong enough yet to endure chemicals that are toxic and that with years-long use have raised questions about long-term health effects. Or long artificial extensions are braided into their natural hair, sometimes so tightly that scalp damage can occur.

At about the age of twelve, I graduated from our kitchen to the beauty parlor on Fourteenth Street where there were grown women in white uniforms—the professionals—who washed my hair and straightened it without the pain. Sitting in their midst for hours at a time, I heard grown women gossip about men and husbands and other women and jobs they hated and grown children who had turned out no good and a Temptations concert at the Howard Theatre. Going to the beauty parlor was as much about growing up and being initiated into the culture of grown Black women as it was about my hair and everyone else’s. The beauticians could brutally joke about women with short hair. That was the worst sin, for a woman’s worth in the Black community, and all over the world, is determined by the length of her hair. “Good hair”—in case I didn’t know by now—was straight, thick, and long. In the beauty parlor, I felt grown up and accepted into the real world of Black hair culture, with the caveat that I knew mine would never be good enough. All the women in my community who were considered the most beautiful had straight hair, women like Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. Where would I fit in, how would I fit in, with my short, coarse hair and brown skin? And even when my hair was straightened, it always “went back” to its natural state. In a reprise of the famous test by sociologist Kenneth Clark that revealed that little Black girls chose White dolls over Black dolls, when little Black boys were tested to see which dolls they preferred, the boys routinely chose the Black dolls which all had smooth hair, because, they said, of their hair. For boys, the magic of straight hair could triumph over the negative connotations of brown skin.

What all this tells us is that hair is not benign, it is important and potent. In the book *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, Lori L. Tharps and Ayana D. Byrd cite the work of the

anthropologist Sylvia Ardyn Boone, who found that among the Mende tribe of Sierra Leone, “ ‘b hair, plenty of hair, much hair,’ were the qualities every woman wanted,” and that “unkempt ‘neglected,’ or ‘messy’ hair implied that a woman either had loose morals or was insane. Traditionally in the Black community, mothers were and still are judged by the state of the daughter’s hair. I remember as a child the worst judgments of adult women being reserved for women whose daughters left the house with “nappy” or indifferently braided hair. This was a dereliction of parental duty that was considered nearly a form of child abuse. A *Washington Post* article about a White gay couple who had adopted a little Black girl cited an incident in which a Black woman, seeing the child on the subway with her two dads, could no longer bear the sight of her amateurish braids and left her seat and began braiding the girl’s hair.

For Black women, hair is not just our crowning glory, it is an expression of our souls. The furor over the hair of the young Olympic gymnast Gabrielle Douglas in the summer of 2012 was largely a Black female reaction to what some women saw as her “nappy hair.” The young teenager gave a brilliant performance, and yes, at times, with the exertion required, her hair did not look as “neat” as her White teammates’. Twitter and Facebook exploded with negative comments from some Black women prompting a mainstream media discussion about Black women and their hair. Media as diverse as the *Huffington Post*, the *Daily Beast*, and *Us Weekly* covered the controversy over what a small but vocal sect of the Black female online community dubbed “messy” and “unkempt” hair. Douglas’s mother was forced to respond to the court of public opinion and post on the Internet explanations and apologies for “what happened to Gabby’s hair.”

Traditionally, among many African groups, a person’s spirit is supposedly nestled in the hair, and the hairdresser is considered the most trustworthy individual in society. Clearly, African American attitudes about hair have been shaped by our living and vibrant cultural heritage, as well as by the requirements of trying to overcome oppressive attitudes about how Black people should look, think, act, and live. The “beauty parlor” and the barbershop remain among the most important institutions in the Black community. They are where we gossip, make friends, and talk politics outside the view and dominion of Whites, and where in many cases we have our confidence and self-esteem restored.

In the 1960s, hair became a form of political and cultural statement and protest. Everyone was letting his or her hair grow out or grow long, men and women, Black and White. The first time I ever liked my face or my hair was when I looked at myself in the mirror the day that I got my natural. I was an eighteen-year-old freshman who had entered American University five months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The world was one of riots and rage and questioning everything from why Blacks had so little power, to why we were in Vietnam, to why Blacks had to look like Whites to be considered beautiful. It was a world of new kinds of questions and answers. Black suddenly became beautiful. I looked around and liked what I saw on the heads and on the faces of my Black female friends and peers who wore Afros. The natural hairstyle showcased their faces and they were faces that seemed to be proud and confident. That is what I wanted to be. It was as if I had never before really seen my face that day I looked in the mirror. My first natural was a delicate

short, close-cropped affair, and the hair that I had hated and been on a quest to change suddenly seemed so lovely, so perfect. My family was aghast. I withstood teasing, and threats from my father cut me off financially, all because of my hair. But for the first time in my life, I accepted my hair as myself.

The natural hairstyle ultimately inspired a resurgence of African-inspired hairdos: twists, cornrows and locks that had a long history among Black women. This simple hairdo laid down a challenge to the central tenet of Black hair and all it stood for—that it was bad and should be rejected. The natural required care but not torturous care. And for me, the fact that my hair became the backdrop for my face, rather than the other way around, was so satisfying. The impact of the natural lasted about a decade. Then straight hair came back with a vengeance, while I kept my own hair natural, except for one or two times when I used a relaxer just for a change. But the chemicals always damaged my hair. The natural revealed, in ways that more traditional styles did not, what I now had come to know was an attractive face. It fit my busy lifestyle, and I liked the way I looked and felt wearing a natural—fresh and comfortable in my skin.

Whatever Black women do to their hair is controversial. The straightening of Black hair was controversial when first introduced at the turn of the twentieth century. The technique was loudly criticized by the Black elite, even though many of them had straight hair that afforded them high levels of acceptance by Whites than other Blacks received. When Blacks moved north during the Great Migration, women with braided hair or unstraightened hair were criticized as “country” and considered an embarrassment to their recently migrated yet suddenly urbanized cousins. Fast-forward half a century, and the Afro and natural were in some corners criticized as unkempt and uncivilized. Even today, many feel that natural hair is questionable as a legitimate hairstyle. The talk show host Wendy Williams criticized the actress Viola Davis so virulently for wearing her hair in a natural style to the Oscars in 2012, you would have thought she had attended the ceremony with a bag on her head. Recently, I was invited to speak to a group of high school girls who wanted to wear natural hair and who had formed a support group to sustain them in their decision. They shared heartbreaking stories of parents and friends who questioned their judgment because of this choice and predicted all manner of ruin and disaster for these girls. Yes, Black women have been fired from corporate jobs for wearing cornrows (too ethnic) and for putting a blond streak in their hair at Hooters (Black women don’t have blond hair). But the CEO of Xerox, Ursula Burns, wears a natural, and the real world of corporations has learned to make room for constantly changing expressions of racial and ethnic beauty, even as there is ever-present pushback, attempting to enforce a unitary beauty and hair standard. This tween and tween is simply called reality.

Black women never really win the hair wars. We keep getting hit by incoming fire from all sides. Today our hair is as much of a conundrum as ever. While Black women spend more on their hair than anyone else, they are routinely less satisfied with results. Weaves, wigs, and extensions are mainstream, from the heads of high school girls to those of TV reality series housewives.

The cultural skirmishes over the significance of Michelle Obama’s hair and her look signifies ju

how important these questions still are. Just as in the minds of many Whites, there is the image of the “angry” Black man and “angry” Black woman (usually brown to black in skin tone, hands on hips often but not always full figured), there is also “angry” Black hair. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, when the *New Yorker* magazine wanted to capture the paranoia that some Whites felt about a possible Obama presidency, the magazine ran a cover that featured Barack Obama dressed as a Muslim cleric and Michelle Obama sporting an Afro, an AK-47 strapped over her shoulders, and a “shut your mouth” glare. While clearly the cover was meant to parody mindless racism, many across the political spectrum took offense.

As First Lady, Michelle Obama has been crowned, quite justly, an American queen of style and glamour. She is considered by many ordinary folk, as well as those who are the arbiters of fashion and style, to be beautiful and elegant and a premier symbol of American female beauty, as influential as Jacqueline Kennedy. And her hair, whether it’s bone straight that day, straight but curly, or straight and shiny, has been an endorsement of conventional, acceptable styles. Just as Barack Obama declared that he was president of “all America,” Michelle Obama’s hair has been accepted from sea to shining sea. All but the most hardcore Black cultural nationalists, who long to see a Black woman with an Afro in the White House, or White racists who have in Internet chat rooms called the First Lady and her daughters “gorillas,” agree that the First Lady is the one Black woman in America who has won the hair wars. And beyond the question of hair, who would have imagined a beautiful brown-skinned, identifiably Black woman as the nation’s First Lady? OK, the revolution just got televised.

Yet the controversy continues generation after generation. The cultural tumult is inspired, I feel, by the questions that continually haunt Black people. Questions that years of activism, protest, and progress have failed to answer in ways we can uniformly accept: Who are we? What makes us “authentic” Black people? What is *our* standard of beauty, and where are the roots of that beauty to be found? We can’t agree on the answers, and we both accept and reject the conclusions forced on us by the larger White society. These questions spring from our position as both central to American culture and perennially marginalized by it.

And there are the other questions that hair leads to as well, about femininity, questions that haunt women of all shades, hues, and races. Why do we have to live under the tyranny of a global doctrine that posits femininity in the length and straightness of a woman’s hair? Especially when real beauty, the kind that can light up a room literally and figuratively, radiates from within? Black women, like women all over the world, live imprisoned by a cultural belief system about beauty and hair whose time should have passed.

Today my natural is full of gray hairs, and I love it and my face more than ever, as the battle about Black hair rages on. I often wonder if, with my college degree, my status as a published author and educator who has worn natural hair for over forty years, I am too dismissive and critical of the reasons why so many Black women care so deeply about the state of their hair. I care about my hair too and have frankly chosen the natural as a form of adornment and statement.

But as I said, if you are a Black woman, hair is serious business. My hairphobic sisters have gotten

the same message that I received relentlessly as a young girl: my natural hair is bad and it could exact a potentially high price if I choose to expose it and exult in it. I have just always been willing to pay the price. But my sisters know that with straight hair they are acceptable in the corporate world. They see high-profile celebrities like Beyoncé disguise her natural hair with a head full of synthetic hair and rule the world. They have lost jobs because they chose to wear braids. They know that many Black men prefer long, straight hair, and they don't care what Black women do to get it.

Yet I am deeply conflicted as I assess the young Black girl making minimum wage at McDonald's sporting a weave that could easily cost thousands of dollars a year to maintain, money that, yes, I daresay she could use to go to college. Certainly a college degree would have a more positive long-term impact on her career goals than a weave. I am conflicted as well by the sight of a Black female professional wearing a wig whose locks reach the middle of her back. All of this is squishy, squirmy, and very difficult to write and speak out loud, for I am violating the racial rules about not airing dirty linen in public and the rule that says sisterhood trumps truths that may be hard to handle. I feel narrow-minded and judgmental, when all I really want is a world where Black women are healthy and have healthy hair that does not put them in the poorhouse, cause health problems, or reinforce the idea that they have to look White to be valued. And this does not mean that I want a world of Black women who have hair that only looks like mine.

Yet who I am to judge? Who am I to assume that women who invest hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars in synthetic hair don't or can't have as much racial pride as I do? Maybe they know something I don't, that what's on your head is not necessarily a barometer of what is in your mind. I know that Black women make these hair choices for reasons beyond reflexive conformity to White beauty standards, reasons such as convenience and the practical need to "fit in" to a prevailing White standard of beauty for the sake of their careers. I know that Black women are damned no matter what we do to our hair. And we are damned, ironically and most cruelly, by our own people, who are not often the ones who hire and fire, but are the ones who accept us into or push us out of the tribe. But I know too how deeply the wounds of racism and self-hatred have burrowed into the souls of Black men and women. I still hear too many Black women, and Black girls of all ages, talk obsessively among themselves, on the Internet, in social media, and face-to-face, about their desire for "good hair" and how much they fear having "bad hair." I am still waiting for that conversation to cease. I have been waiting all my life.

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