

Hair Gods

Ponytails

My sister Lisa's hands are memory—rough-bristle brush dipping into water, Blue Magic hair grease warming between her palms. She parts my hair with precision, creating four tight sections: two framing my face, two anchoring the back. Standing on the bathroom step stool, I watch my reflection: wide forehead gleaming, puffy ponytails defiant. In that moment, I felt profoundly beautiful, my young self floating with the confidence of embracing my natural hair.

Perm

Seventh grade brought the promise of transformation. Those boxed perm models with their perfect curls and seamless bangs represented an ideal I desperately wanted to inhabit. Lisa approached the process like a ritual—Vaseline creating a protective barrier, her gloved hands applying the chemical cream that smelled of sulfuric rebellion.

The burn was unexpected, sudden. We rushed to the kitchen sink, water cascading against my scalp, washing away both chemicals and childhood. When Lisa ran her fingers through my newly transformed hair, I understood: change requires both pain and release.

Weave

My stylist was an architect of identity. Each consultation was a negotiation of self—drop curls, bobs, invisible parts. The process was methodical: braiding my natural hair, waiting under the dryer, applying tracks with surgical precision. The final flat iron blended worlds—manufactured and organic becoming indistinguishable.

"Just like that, I was a new woman." Not just new, but reimagined.

Locs

The history of locs dates back to ancient times. Egyptian pharaohs were carved into stone with their hair coiled into ropes, and mummified bodies have been discovered with their locs still intact.

During the Rastafarian movement in the 20th century, locs became a symbol of resistance against oppression, influenced by African traditions and biblical references. For many Black people, locs represent a spiritual and cultural reclamation of identity, countering the idea that straightened hair is the only acceptable form of beauty.

In 1999, a Levi's ad portrayed an African American man with locs, holding a sign that read: "Conformity leads to mediocrity."

My future self is already imagined: gray dreads signaling wisdom, survival, unbroken spirit.

Short Cut

Embracing my "real" hair meant confronting vulnerability. A permed short cut, beloved by my boyfriend, quickly revealed its demands. Daily heat styling became a battle against breakage, my carefully crafted salon look slowly unraveled.

Braids

More than aesthetic, braids are ancestral text. African tribes encoded identity in intricate patterns; enslaved ancestors wove survival into their hairstyles. When I braid my hair, I'm not just protecting my curls—I'm continuing a conversation started generations ago.

During the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans braided rice and seeds into their hair as a means of survival, preparing for the unknown. Today, braids serve as a link to our past, a reclaiming of ancestral beauty, and a protective style that nurtures natural hair.

When I wear braids, I feel closer to my roots.

A Debate

When a woman changes her hair drastically all the time, a man can see she doesn't know herself," my boyfriend said across the table.

"Black women like to express themselves. There's nothing wrong with that," I countered.

"You can change your hair. But why bangs one week and long red hair the next? Like your friend Asia."

"It's like changing your nails. Some men like it. You can't speak for all men."

"Hmph," he scoffed. "Just pick a hairstyle. You can change it up, but pick a style."

"You can't put women in a box." I was adamant, but deep down, a part of me wondered if he had a point.

The argument revealed more than his perspective—it exposed my own uncertainty about self-definition.

Growth

In an interview, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was asked if her dramatic change in hairstyles had anything to do with her creative process as a writer.

She answered, "No, it says a lot more about where I am in my growth process as a woman."

I understand that.

Sometimes, I still feel the need to straighten my hair for certain occasions because braids or puffy styles aren't always seen as professional. The European standard of beauty still holds

power in corporate spaces, forcing Black women to make a choice—embrace their natural hair or conform to expectations. Laws like the CROWN Act, which prohibit hair discrimination, have been passed in some states, but the struggle persists.

My hair has been a battlefield and a sanctuary. Each style—from tight ponytails to intricate weaves, from short cuts to braids—has been a declaration. A statement that beauty is not a fixed point, but a living, breathing expression of identity.

I am still learning. Still growing. Still refusing to be contained.

Every woman deserves to look in the mirror—stripped of expectations, wearing her most authentic self—and see nothing less than pure, unfiltered beauty.