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I Freed Myself When I Embraced My Locks

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When I was a little girl, every day was a bad hair day. In the morning, my grandmother would wash my hair, then straighten it with a hot pressing comb, yanking my naturally thick, kinky hair, and jerking my head in every direction. The heat from the comb was so intense that I would wince before Grandma ran it through my hair. And though she did her best to be careful, the imprint of the comb's teeth was left on my ears, neck and temples. The heavy stench of burnt hair and hair grease filled the kitchen. I hated this ritual so much that I hoped she would forget to do it. And even worse than the physical discomfort that came from straightening my hair was Grandma's commentary: "Lord, your hair is a job to do! Look at this nappy mess! Keep still! Stop moving around!"

And so it began, my lifelong obsession with straight hair. In addition to the daily reminders from Grandma, I had the media to help me along in my self-loathing. The models in fashion magazines all had flowing coiffures that bounced and behaved, not tight, coarse coils like mine. Advertisements targeted at black women promise freedom from the oppression of the hot pressing comb with the use of harsh chemical relaxers.

When I first heard about relaxers, I thought my prayers had been answered. I wanted one when I was younger, but the older, wiser women in my family warned me against it. They had experienced hair loss when they had relaxers, and they didn't want that to happen to me. But I was tired of getting my hair pressed only to have it revert back to its natural state after getting wet. I was tired of wearing wigs because my frustration with my hair had gotten to the point that I just chose to cover it up. So naturally, I ignored my elders' advice and got my first relaxer at the age of 19. When I saw my new hair in the mirror, I was in awe. It was sleek and shiny, flowing past my shoulders, down my back, swinging when I turned my head. I finally had the straight hair I had coveted for so long. I felt like the sexiest woman in the world. My confidence increased, and suddenly flirtatious men were coming from every direction. It felt great to be noticed.

For a while, the style was easy to maintain--if my hair got wet, it wouldn't revert, and my comb could glide right through it. Unfortunately, the maintenance of my new hairstyle was costly. I couldn't afford to return to the salon to get touch-ups, so once the relaxer was replaced by the new hair that grew underneath it, I was forced to go back to wearing wigs.

In 2002, a year after having a steady job, I decided to return to the same salon to get my hair relaxed again,

and got my touch-ups every two or three months. Eventually I began to notice that my hair was breaking off. I would comb my hair and big clumps would come right out. In about nine months, my hair that once hung to the middle of my back was stopping slightly above my shoulders. Turns out the elders were right after all.

My mother noticed my hair loss and persuaded me to stop using chemicals, plunging me back, yet again, into a conundrum that I'd struggled with my entire life: what to do about my thick, kinky, misbehaving hair. Chemicals were out of the question, and I was tired of wearing wigs. Suddenly, a frightening thought occurred to me--"Am I going to have to wear my hair nappy?" The only natural style that I knew about was the Afro, but when I started to research the many possibilities for styling my hair naturally, I was pleasantly surprised to find the Afro is just the beginning.

Now that I've worn my hair naturally for two years, I can't imagine putting another relaxer in my hair. Wearing my hair naturally has opened my eyes to my own beauty, and eliminated some major hassles. I don't miss being in the salon from morning till sunset. I don't miss running from rain clouds. Most importantly, I don't miss hair loss.

One day, about five months after I started wearing my natural hair, I was out getting lunch when I heard words that sounded almost foreign to me: "Your hair is so thick and pretty!" The woman who complimented me not only put a smile on my face, she confirmed something I had struggled to convince myself of--that my natural hair was beautiful, too. I'm now proud to wear it, to show other black women that our hair is gorgeous just the way it is. It took me years to get to a peaceful place about my hair, but in the end, I got it all straightened out.

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