

About My Hair

My hair is falling out! Amber-brown strands – color courtesy L’Oreal – lodge in my brush and comb, decorate the terra cotta tiles of my bathroom floor, and float across the water as I try to ease my distress with a vanilla scented bath. And I am to blame. If it’s true that you can tell a woman’s state of mind by her hair, my hair speaks volumes.

“There are lots of women inside me, and they’re all clamoring for center stage,” I’ve told people who comment about my frequent changes of hairstyle and color. A security guard at work once said, “You don’t look anything like your ID badge. Your husband sure must love all your different looks.” But that’s not true. Bob prefers my hair natural – in color and texture. It is my 12-year-old self I seek to please. The me whose soft, fuzzy hair refused to conform on those long-ago Easter Sundays when other little black girls like me sported bouncy Shirley Temple curls at the Easter pageant. By the time my family and I walked to church, my hot-comb-curls looked like fat sausage links. The next day, I’d be back in braids while my classmates flaunted their fancy do’s.

What I really wanted was hair like my best friend, Jackie Montgomery. Every other week, she arrived at school looking as if she had just stepped off the pages of an Ebony magazine advertisement. Jackie said it took a whole afternoon of torture for Mrs. Reeva, the neighborhood hairdresser, to make her long tresses silky. I would gladly have spent an afternoon in Hell, in order to have hair as beautiful as Jackie’s.

At 17, after my Mama’s death, I clipped four inches from my locks, then used a wooden-handled metal comb heated on a gas burner to straighten them. Occasionally, I burned my scalp as I strove to press out my nappy edges. Untutored, I even managed to create soft curls with that hot comb. When chemical treatments that coerced nappy hair into a state of submission became available, I begged hairdressers for help. One after another, they ran their fingers through my hair, then repeated the same line: “those chemicals are too strong for your soft hair. They’ll burn it off.”

In the late ‘60s, Black people embraced the Afro as a bold, political statement. For me, it represented liberation from the hot comb. Finally, my hair’s natural tendency to swell when the temperature or humidity rose benefited me. I can still remember that spring morning in 1968 when I stood at the bus stop feeling as if I had been reborn. I no longer needed to smooth back nappy edges, or press bangs down over my high forehead. Instead, I beamed in the morning sun, feeling that my frizzy halo of hair proclaimed me as attractive as any other young woman on her way to work.

I later made an appointment at a neighborhood hair salon and asked the stylist to neaten-up my lopsided Afro. To my dismay, he whittled it down to two inches. I protested loudly, while he insisted that I’d grow to love it and that my face was far too small to be hidden under a big head of hair. Like Sampson, involuntarily shorn of my locks, at first I felt vulnerable; then, different. Finally, I realized that I had always felt different, even when I had hair. After a few weeks, I grew to love my short hair. It was easy to care for, only requiring a few swipes with an Afro pick before I left for work. I also felt sparkly, vibrant, and strong -- as if I had shed my old, restrictive skin, and begun to live anew. Sometimes I let my Afro grow long; other times, I wore it chopped down to half an inch.

A summer visit to Newark, NJ in the mid ‘70s led me to yet another experience. Everyone in the neighborhood where I stayed sported cornrows with brightly colored beads interspersed and dangling

from braids at the ends. Even though I worked at a Baltimore civil service job, and worried about how the bureaucrats would react to this outrageous new style (this was years before Bo Derek popularized cornrows in the movie "Ten"), I could not resist the lure. I paid a neighborhood teen \$15 to braid and decorate my hair. The day I returned from vacation and walked through the lobby of City Hall into my office, everyone -- white and black -- stared. Nobody said a word, and I thoroughly enjoyed the sense of discomfort I created. What were they thinking? That my change from Afro to braids signaled some new, more militant, leaning? I was the same person, but with a new look. After a few weeks, I tired of beads jangling around my ears. I unbraided my hair and let it spring back to its old style.

"I almost didn't recognize you with all that gray in your hair," my older sister Dee said years later, during a visit.

"I don't understand it," I told her. "I'm the youngest in the family, yet, I'm the only one with gray hair."

"No, you're not," she said with a laugh. "The rest of us dye our hair. So should you." Before Dee's visit ended, my gray was covered with a "Nice & Easy" rinse. Later, when the Jerry-Curl became popular, I gladly plunked down my cash for a head full of shiny, moisture-laden curls. The stockpile of conditioners it required kept my hair so soft and moistened that it grew thick and long; but I tired of the gooey do and believed my stylist when she said that science had made relaxers much gentler.

I gripped the arms of the chair while she combed a gooey white cream through my hair. Would I really be set free from burns on the tender skin of my ears, the smell of burning hair, and the fear of leaving a grease spot on a date's shoulder when we slow danced? Or would my hair fall out? After the stylist rinsed the chemicals from my hair, neutralized and conditioned it, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. "Will it stay like this?" I asked incredulously, as I touched the soft, silky-straight hair on my head.

"Uh-huh, until new hair starts to grow in, then you'll need a touch up," she said.

I was ecstatic! Finally, I had hair like Jackie's. I savored the variety of styles my new hair allowed and reveled in the joy of torrid lovemaking sessions, without worrying about my hair reverting to natural. However, the high cost of professional touch-ups and coloring soon drove me to the do-it-yourself-aisle in the beauty supply store.

At first everything worked well, but with repeated applications, my hair developed a greenish undertone. "You first need to apply red to counteract the gray, then apply black," the salesclerk said when I explained my dilemma. The two-step process was time consuming, but successful.

Every two or three weeks, when my grayish roots made their appearance, I relaxed them. The following week, I touched up the color. For years, I calculated every date, meeting, and party around my hair coloring and relaxing schedule. Over an eight-year period, I spent about 576 hours (24 days), and \$2,300 dollars coloring and relaxing my hair. Finally, I wearied of the routine, and decided to let my hair return to its natural color, whatever that might be. I continued to relax my locks, however, since I wasn't willing to be gray and nappy headed.

As the months passed, my endeavor drew attention. A saleswoman in Bloomingdale's warned that gray hair would make me look old. Several women commended my willingness to let nature show its

true colors. I was tempted to renew coloring when my hair began to resemble a skunk's two-toned tail, but somehow, I held out. After nearly two years, I sported a shoulder-length, salt and pepper pageboy.

After a bout of mercury poisoning caused by eating too much seafood, my salt and pepper locks lost their pepper, and my pony-tail turned as thin as a rat's tail. On doctor's orders, I shunned seafood for a few months. My system rid itself of mercury, but my now gray hair remained thin. I bought a variety of wigs that mimicked my old hair. Then, an ad for hair extensions caught my eye. "Have hair like the movie stars. Guaranteed to give you thick, luxurious hair in less than two hours. Safe, natural-looking." I had to have it, No matter what it cost,. I dialed the number in the ad. "I'm African American, and my hair is relaxed," I said to the woman who answered. "Can you match my texture?"

"We match all racial types," she said. "Would you like to make an appointment?"

"Yes," I said, "as soon as possible."

The trendy little shop in SoHo looked like a spread in a high fashion magazine. Matt, my boyish stylist, had spiked blond locks tipped with neon blue. He handed me a book like the ones fabric swatches come in, and said, "Pick a color that matches yours." I browsed through page after page of hair extensions in every color imaginable.

"Perfect match," he said, holding the sample I selected close to my hair. He sashayed into the back room and returned with a thick swath of gray hair braided onto a mesh strip. He chatted amiably as he unbraided the extensions, then braided them onto individual strands of my hair. "Most women who come in here want to add length," he said. "You're the first to only want fullness."

"My long wigs are dramatic," I said, "but after a few hours, I want to take them off. Since I'll have to live with these extensions 24/7, I don't want to be uncomfortable."

"That makes sense," he said.

I closed my eyes and let Matt's fingers perform their magic. Two hours later, my hair was doubled in thickness. I had to part the roots in order to tell where my real hair ended, and the extensions began. I handed the receptionist a check for \$250, put a hair-care tip-sheet in my purse and strutted out of the shop, certain that everyone I passed envied my luxurious locks.

I grew bored with the extensions after a few months but was unwilling to return to SoHo for their removal. I unbraided them myself -- a foolish mistake -- and was left with ragged, split ends. At a neighborhood unisex barbershop, I queued up with hip-hop teen-agers, and older men. "Make it short. About an inch all over," I instructed the barber, when it was my turn in his chair.

At first, I was uncomfortable being gray and nearly bald, so I bought an obviously fake platinum-blond wig that mimicked my old pageboy. When the mid-summer heat induced me to stop wearing it, I applied Simply Silver to highlight my dull gray. Instead, it turned my chemically relaxed hair blond. I was certain everyone would laugh the first time I went out in public. Instead, a young man in a passing convertible shouted, "You are one hot Mama!" It was true. Blondes really attracted more attention.

As my blond rinse faded, my gray re-emerged, and my hair slowly grew back. This past winter, Bob and I spent February in Florida. Surrounded by elderly, white-haired people, I sought to distinguish

myself from them (as if my brown skin wasn't enough distinction) and selected L'Oreal's Amber brown as the perfect cover-up. My thirsty gray hair soaked up the brown color. Even Bob liked it.

Three weeks after returning home, I relaxed the new growth at my roots. Instead of leaving the chemicals on my hair for 13 minutes, I answered a phone call and lost track of time. As soon as I rinsed my hair, I knew something was wrong. It felt brittle and dry. I deep conditioned it, but it remained coarse. Neither vitamin-enriched oils, nor heavy-duty conditioners helped. Day-by-day, my hair felt thinner. When I finally got the courage to look in my bathroom's rear-view mirror, it revealed cocoa colored scalp – shining through long, thin strands. Frantically, I searched for a local stylist who could help me. The one I found said, "The good news is, there's new growth at the roots," she said, "but I'll have to cut it very short."

I hated the pixie cut she gave me and skulked out of her shop like a dog who'd just been groomed for the summer heat. As soon as I reached my car, I pulled a wig from my purse and slapped it on. Several days passed before I was comfortable enough to leave home wig-less.

People tell me they never know what to expect when they see me. Truth is, on any given day, I never know how I'm going to want to look. Hair is a static, defining factor -- it's how most people are quickly identified. Since Black people mostly have the same color hair, descriptions like, blond, brunette, or redhead can seldom be used to distinguish one of us from another -- genetics makes us homogenous in crowds. Perhaps my hair-games are my silent protest against invisibility. With all my changes — long hair, curly hair, straight hair, fake wigs, realistic wigs, hair extensions, or braids — people are forced to look beyond my hair in order to see ME.