

THE BIG CHOP

CHRISTIAN BELL

Elgin, Texas, June 21st 2011

The metal handle of my grandmother's silver scissors felt warm between my fingertips. It was around midnight and all that could be heard in the house were the harmonious buzz of cicadas, soft snores of my sleeping grandparents, and my heart threatening to beat out of my chest. I tiptoed barefoot to the small white bathroom and stared in the large hanging mirror at the girl I no longer desired to be. Slowly, I positioned the scissors at the battle line, the line where thick natural curls met straightened heat damaged ends. Then quickly: *SNIP! SNIP! SNIP!* Five inches of straight black hair floated onto the floor like swan feathers on a lake.

Five months earlier

"Well, what do you think?" my mother asked as she sashayed into the kitchen. The white ceramic dish I was washing nearly slipped out of my hands as my eyes locked in on her new teeny tiny afro.

"Y-you cut your hair?!" I exclaimed. For as long as I could remember, a silky shoulder-length black mane had been my mother's signature look. As a young child, I would watch in wonder as she used metal clips to wrap her shiny black hair every night and unveil beautiful straight hair in the morning. To me, she looked regal, her chin always held up high and hair silky straight.

For years, I believed that in order to be beautiful or professional, my hair would need to be straight. But on that day, my views were challenged. My mom's caramel skin seemed to shine brighter than any sunrise as she embraced the tiny curls and coils on her head.

She gave me a toothy grin. "I feel ...free," she said. I gave her a half-smile. Though she had expressed to me a few weeks before that she was tired of the many hours and hundreds of dollars we spent every two weeks at the salon to straighten our hair, her decision to cut off at least eight inches of her jet black hair still came as a surprise.

It shocked others, as well. It was 2011, the start of the natural hair movement, and very few women sported afros. My mother was often met in grocery stores with stares or passive aggressive comments like: *Does your husband like your hair like that?* Or: *You look nice, but natural hair isn't for everyone.*

These comments that my mother received from her friends at work and even elders at church made me believe going natural wouldn't be for me.

Until it had to be.

That summer we traveled to Elgin, Texas to visit my grandparents. I'll never forget being able to see the heat as we stepped off the plane. The 100+ degree weather was unlike any I had ever experienced back home in Seattle. And it showed. Within the first three days of our six-week trip, I found myself in a constant battle with hair that defied gravity. Humidity would cause it to shrink, shrivel, and poof into a frizzy mess. Each of those mornings, the small white bathroom would fill with the smell of burnt toast as I spent two hours trying to fry my hair into submission. But each night I'd arrive back to my grandparent's home with the same result: Troll doll hair.

On the fourth day, I didn't race to the bathroom to straighten my hair. Instead, I stayed in the fluffy white queen bed and, in a fit of frustration, sobbed into my pillow. Then, like Cinderella's fairy godmother, I heard my grandmother step into the room. I looked up at her. Her brown sugar skin was clear and smooth. She sat on the edge of the bed holding a jar of Kinky Curly conditioner.

"Would you like me to show you how to care for your curly hair?" she asked. My grandmother used to relax her hair, a process in which a thick white cream is applied to the hair to chemically straighten curls. After my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, she decided to lay off the harsh chemicals and go natural.

I admired her long chestnut brown ringlets. And in a mixture of defeat and curiosity, nodded my head as a yes to her question. The next few days I began to relearn my hair. It was amazing how much I didn't know about this physical part of myself. But then again, I had my hair straightened since the age of three.

Seattle, January 2000

The tiny red lights of my pink Skechers flashed as my beautician, Melissa, adjusted me in her big black chair.

“Alright, sweetie what style would you like today?” she cooed while playing with a chunk of my huge afro. I smiled up at her and excitedly pointed to Princess Aurora on the cover of my *Sleeping Beauty* coloring book. Like any three-year-old, becoming a princess was my dream and I couldn’t wait to attend my ballet class with long flowing golden hair like Aurora.

“You aren’t blonde, sweet pea. Try again,” Melissa laughed. And just like that, my spirit was crushed like a water balloon dropped on pavement. I gazed at my kinky curly locks in the huge hanging mirror and frowned. She was right. I didn’t have princess hair like Aurora. But that wouldn’t stop me from trying.

“Please,” I begged.

“Alright sweet pea, I’ll do my best,” Melissa sighed.

Back to Elgin, Texas

My grandmother gave me tips and tricks on caring for my kinky curly hair that would last a lifetime. For example, I learned that towel drying my hair stripped my curls of their moisture. Instead, she taught me to use an old T-shirt to dry my hair. This method not only helped my curls with water retention but also helped them keep their shape. However, because the ends of my hair were damaged by heat, my hair looked a bit odd. Where the roots and shaft were kinky curly, the ends were completely limp and straight. I was able to practice a series of styles such as twisting and braiding to make the hair the same pattern, but I would need to cut the ends to truly embrace the natural look.

I contemplated this decision for days. I knew if I decided to cut off those five inches of hair, I would never go back to straightening it so often again. I thought about how I felt with my hair in its natural state that week. I felt refreshed. I could swim or walk in the rain without a fear that my hair would be ruined. I could wash my hair and leave the house without first blow-drying or flat ironing it. I realized how draining it had been to fight against what my hair did naturally and I was tired of being someone I wasn’t meant to be. So as the moon rose high into the starry night sky and not another voice could be heard, I grabbed a pair of scissors out of the drawer.

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When it was finished, I felt around my newly shaped hair and shook my curls and coils in shock and amazement. Just then, my mother opened the door, her bare feet stepping on tufts of hair on the tiled floor. She looked down, and then up at me, perplexed.

“Y-you cut your hair?” she asked. I smiled at her and she gave me a big hug. “You should have asked me and I would have gotten it cut professionally,” she scolded. Then she took a big sigh, smiled at me, and said, “Do you like it?”

I looked at our image in the mirror. Our black hair like soft clouds in the sky. “Yes. Of course,” I said. “All of it.”