

# KEEP YOUR HEAD UP

Tiera Nhem

---

Long, slim fingers gently but firmly push down on the back of my head, raising my gaze from the label on the curl cream back to the mirror. I watch as my mom readjusts her grip on my hair as she pauses to grab a rubber band before deftly securing my dark, curly hair in a high ponytail, making sure to smooth back any unruly edges.

“Alright, there we go,” she sighs as she leans past me to wash her hands. I step out of the way to give her room and peer back into the mirror at her work. I give a few small head bobs and watch the curls bounce around my head.

She made it look so easy.

\*\*\*

I lay in bed for a moment after waking up, listening. No sink running in the kitchen, no sound of pots or pans, no footsteps moving throughout the small duplex. I’m the first one awake. I stay there a moment longer before my grumbling belly propels me out of bed and into the hall. It’s Saturday, I realize happily.

Before I learned to let her sleep in on weekends, I’d come barging into her room at unholy hours (any time before 8 o’clock). It took me awhile to understand her reluctance to part with the sweet embrace of sleep. Cracking her door open, I can see that early morning has bathed the room in a soft, dreamy light, filtered by green curtains. Her bed, planted squarely in front of the window, takes up the majority of the room-- the surface so massive I can’t even tell which side of the bed she’s on.

“Mom.” The mound of covers shifts slightly, but there’s no answer. I call again, “Moooooooooom.”

A muffled noise that barely passes as speech that I decide to interpret as “Yes?” comes from underneath her comforter. Crossing

the room, I rest my arms and chin on the creaky wooden frame at the foot of the bed. “Mom, it’s morning, it’s time to wake up.”

A beat passes before she manages to get out, “Just give me a few more minutes, Tia, and I’ll get up. Just a little more.”

I trace and retrace the edges of the ornate patterns on the duvet with my fingernail. Dusky green and tan. “Ok, but it’s Saturday,” I say expectantly. After a bit of silence, I do as she says and leave her in peace to fully wake up. I keep myself busy by letting our dog, Koda, outside and feeding him. My main responsibilities fulfilled for the morning, I retreat to my room to play videogames, but it isn’t long before Mom’s door opens, and I hurriedly switch off the console to make my way to the kitchen.

Saturday meant no school and no work. Saturday meant pancakes or French toast and reggae. For only a few hours, only on Saturday on KEPX, could we tune in to hear it. All it took was a few adjustments of the dials on the pink Hello Kitty radio I lugged out of my room, and we’d be dancing, the jaunty, breezy beats and cheerful horns, synth keyboards, and a plethora of other wonderful instruments filling the kitchen. For those few hours, there was nothing to do but enjoy the morning and our time together. Saturday was our day.

“Where do you think we should go today?” she asks, leaning back from her cleared plate. “Maybe...” she trails off a bit as I stuff my mouth with pancakes and strawberries, eyeing her with bright anticipation. “I think we should get outside today, what do you think?”

I agree enthusiastically. “Can we have a picnic? We can buy sandwiches!”

“How about we make them instead?”

We smile at each other. It’s settled.

\*\*\*

We were partners in crime. The dynamic duo. We’d go everywhere together (looking back on it, there wasn’t much of a choice). Whether it was to the park, the movies, a museum, or even a simple trip to the grocery store, every excursion felt special. Being included made me feel like an adult, like she thought I was mature enough to handle her world.

We went to the library a lot. I remember one particular time I went

## *Keep Your Head Up*

to check out a hefty stack of books to keep me preoccupied during the summer:

She eyes the bounty balanced in my arms. “Do you have any non-fiction books in there?”

I pretend I had not neglected to pick any on purpose and make a show of going through the stack I was carrying. “No... I don’t think I do,” I shrug.

Her brow furrows a little. Here we go. “C’mon Tia, don’t just read fiction. Expand your mind!” I try to resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Do you know how much you could learn if you read as many nonfiction books as you read fiction?” She continues, ignoring my expression, “There’s so much knowledge out there, but you have to seek it out for yourself.”

“But I am still learning, Mom,” I pause, thinking of a way to convince her. “I’m developing my vocabulary,” I say jokingly. “And plus, do you know how many new worlds and characters there are in each book I read? That’s expanding my... acceptance. Of other people.”

She shifts her weight to one leg, unimpressed. “One nonfiction book.”

“Bu—”

“One nonfiction.”

I sigh exasperatedly and turn back towards the shelves. She ended up being right though.

\*\*\*

I stare at my reflection with mounting frustration. I’ve been attempting to tame my hair for what feels like hours this morning before school and once again, the wish to simply have straight hair like the majority of the kids in my class is something I couldn’t want more. As I continue staring, I feel a dry heat rising in my throat and my eyes beginning to prickle.

You can’t rely on her for everything.

Why can’t you do this one thing by yourself?

She has enough to worry about without you crying to her all the time about your hair.

Viciously swiping the tears leaking down my face, I rake my fingers through my curls, willing them into submission before tying

*Tiera Nhem*

it into a tight, simple ponytail. It will be a long time before the hair on my head ceases to be my enemy and becomes a source of pride. For now, I curse its existence. Narrowing my eyes almost as if daring it to act out, I tighten the rubber band, pulling the hair taut against the sides of my head.

\*\*\*

The way I find out Santa isn't real is when I wake up to find nothing under our tree on Christmas Day.

I start sobbing, big, hot tears rolling down my face. Santa really isn't real. Those kids at school, whispering what felt like ugly, unimaginative truths were right. I wonder what else I don't know about the world.

Mom starts crying with me, though I don't know why she would be so upset about me finding out the truth. She pulls me in close, wrapping her slender arms around me, and hugs me tight, both of us just crying for a while until she eventually calms me down and the tears run out.

Later she'll produce a gift—her own black velvet Victoria's Secret jewelry box fixed to read "Tiera's Secret." There'll be an envelope with cash in it and a long note apologizing for something that is not her fault.

"You're too beautiful to cry on Christmas Day," is just one of the lines.

Later she takes my cousins and me to the mall to search for my own Christmas gift.

\*\*\*

When school was canceled because of heavy snow while I was still in elementary, I didn't think twice when my mom brought me to her work—I was just excited that she thought I could handle myself well enough to come with her. A children's dentistry with video game consoles, dozens and dozens of stuffed animals and other toys, a playhouse, books, and an actual arcade machine was practically a wonderland for any child. To me, it was a treat to be able to go there.

I didn't question why I was there so often, why I became really close

## *Keep Your Head Up*

with all the dental assistants, or why my mom's bosses, Dr. Camm and Dr. Sun, almost felt like uncles to me. It didn't feel out of the ordinary to go to my grandpa's house every day during the summer or to have him watch me after school, having caught the bus all the way from Tacoma. His, and my aunt and uncle's house felt like second and third homes to me.

The realization of just how hard my mom had to work to support us will not hit me until I'm older, and when it does, it will like a sack of bricks.

\*\*\*

"Tonight, do you think you could read me a poem?"

She smiles and takes the thin, white book of poems from my outstretched hands.

Quickly snuggling under the covers and wrapping my arms around the soft, sandy brown body of my stuffed dog, I close my eyes expectantly. Save for the golden shaft of light being let in from the open door, my room is completely dark. Then, her smooth, clear voice fills the air, as she begins reading.

Her words paint shimmering images of faraway worlds in my head as she describes story after story. Worn and tangled paths through woods. The endlessly infinite eyes of a simple fish. A cat and owl deeply in love. Undiscovered wonders of the sea. Soon I no longer feel like I'm in bed, and I slowly drift off, riding the waves of her voice.

\*\*\*

I finish drying my hands and straighten up to view my work. Soft, black curls cascade in front of my shoulders, glistening in the light as I move closer to inspect the crown of my head and the clip securing half my hair.

"Need any help?" She pushes open the door to the bathroom, leaning against the door frame.

"I don't know, what do you think?" I ask as I do a slow twirl for her to see my hair from all angles. I smile, a bit shyly, a bit nervously.

"I think... You did a great job. Don't need me to do anything." She smiles and straightens. "Are you ready?"

*Tiera Nhem*

My throat's a bit dry as I swallow and nod firmly. "As ready as I'll ever be." I laugh, "I don't think I can possibly practice anymore— I want to save my voice."

"Remember, start strong. It might be hard to look out to the audience with an instrument, but project," she pauses and shifts a bit. "I'm so excited to hear you sing." Although I'm a bit taller than her now, she still wraps me in a hug, and the nervousness that had been buzzing around my body evaporates. I squeeze her back even tighter.

Keep your head up.