

# Hot Comb Heirlooms



An essay  
by Marlina Brown

I wasn't nervous about what my great-grandmother would say, but my grandfather said I should be. My hair was tapered, cut low in the back on the sides. The top had a few inches coiled messily with twists.

Great-Grandma Lulu had her back to me, hands busy at the stove even in the summer heat.

"Hey Grandma," I said.

She turned around, "Hey little lady! Did my favorite grandbaby—"

She screamed and ran over to me, grabbing what was left of my hair. She asked me what happened and I just said, "I cut it."

She gasped with a hand over her mouth and backed away. "You ain't one of them dykes now are you?"

I rolled my eyes at her and sighed. I explained to her: no I am not a dyke; I cut my hair just because I felt like it.

That wasn't enough for her. She punched me in my arm. Her small fists with the brown skin wrapped around wiry muscles were weak.

She wagged her finger at me as she said, "Young lady, your hair is your crown. Why would you throw out your crown?"

I shrugged and let my mind wander as she continued to rant, hands flailing, lips flapping a mile a minute. As far as I was concerned, I still wore my crown. It was polished and shining.

When I decided to cut my hair, some people had their two cents to give; most gave it behind my back. People whispered just loud enough to make sure I overheard: "Who does she think she is? Rihanna?" Or bother my mother: "Why would you let her do that to your hair?" "What she really needs is a relaxer."

I remember my first relaxer. I was six and far too “tender headed” for my mother to try and manage my unruly head into some sort of a style. I had no idea what getting a relaxer meant and what exactly it was going to do to my head. My mom said I wasn’t allowed to scratch my head. I thought that was silly so of course when I had an itch, I’d scratch it. Little did I know how much I would regret it. She didn’t tell me that scratching my scalp would rub the old skin cells away, making the new ones fresh and vulnerable to the abuse that was to come.

Mom started the process on a Saturday. She cracked open the children’s kit. The little brown girls on the box smiling and shiny looked like me, I suppose; the only difference was that their hair was silky straight, slicked back, long and tamed. I assumed that *that* was exactly what I was going to look like. I just didn’t understand how I was going to get there. My mom slipped on the plastic gloves that came with the kit and began mixing the labeled chemicals together. Some stinky pink stuff was swirled together with some white foul stuff in a jar and I realized this is what was going in my hair, and through some chemical reactions I was going to look just like the smiling brown girls on the box. Except I didn’t.

It burned. A lot. At first the feeling was warm and humming. Then the humming turned into a violent vibration that soon became a screaming burn. I cried, and begged for my mom to wash it out. She said it wouldn’t work properly if I didn’t keep it in long enough. After 7 minutes, my volume was reaching a whole new level. It was animalistic and I knew my mother would lose the little patience she had and dunk my scorching scalp into the sink.

When my hair was dry, it was still the brown, thick jungle it has always been and was meant to be. Each individual strand was straight, but it was still wild and was not slick and silky like the girls’ on the box. And so I needed the comb.

The hot comb was first used in 1872 by a Parisian beautician to straighten the unruly masses of curls in even the most coiled hair textures. When introduced in America, Madam CJ Walker modified

it in a way that it swiftly became the number one way for black women to obtain straight hair. (This was before relaxers).

A fine-toothed metal comb is heated on a stove top that’s between 300 to 500 degrees. It’s pulled through the hair and changes the curl pattern of the hair and burns it, to make it straight. For many black women it was a way to obtain European beauty, to gain higher social and economic standing. To me it was a whole different brand of torture.

Because I whined too much and didn’t let the chemicals sit, my hair was “straight” but not “silky.” The hot comb was the final measure. I’d seen my mom use it on my sister but I didn’t realize how terrifying the sizzles and pops would be. I could hear the searing hot comb actually humming with heat as it approached my scalp. The terror settled in my gut. I could hear my hair crackling, frying like a sunny side up egg on a well-greased pan. The comb was hot enough to burn the flesh behind my ears and at the nape of my neck. It didn’t help that I tried to wriggle away. My shoulders would creep up to my ears. I was trying to fold in on myself to protect any exposed skin the comb would try to eat away. My mother held me down with one arm and combed with another, giving her heavy hand very little control. I couldn’t see anything anymore. The tears blurred everything. I was blind and burning.

My mother was unfazed by the wailing, as was my sister. They both endured the same torture; my sister by our mother, my mother by her grandmother. The weapon, the demon in question was only a few years younger than I. Mom bought it to replace the one stolen from her that was a gift from her aunt, which was a present from *her* mother. It was sort of like an heirloom. A hot comb heirloom.

My blood and my lineage are mixed, but without a doubt my ancestors were chained, bound and sold, either on Caribbean Islands or in on the shit-filled streets of the New World. That hot comb was passed down from black woman to black woman in my family, from Douglas to Douglas and then to Brown, then stolen by another black woman. What does that say about how my family views beauty?

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Most holidays, I sat between my mother and my Great Aunt Rozelynn. As the years went by, my eyes were able to see over the edge of the white-clothed oak table. I could see across it into the scrunched face of my Great Aunt Roxanne, who was trying hard to recall: Was it Old Mrs. Thompson that just passed, or her sister Miss Lula? And were those new people who moved up on "The Hill" Puerto Rican? Not more Puerto Ricans...

Later on, my Grandfather, who didn't celebrate holidays, would drop by. He'd make fun of my hair, or how fat I was, and would snicker while I sniffled. I grew up with these men and women who taught me what they each thought beauty was. Diana Ross was beautiful. Oprah Winfrey was beautiful. Beyoncé was beautiful. Hillary Clinton was not beautiful, and neither was Angelina Jolie or Sandra Bullock. Then they would whisper, thinking I couldn't hear: Cousin Mookie wasn't beautiful; she was far too fat. My older sister Racine wasn't beautiful; she would never be not too skinny. My mother was beautiful because she let her long African/Puerto Rican/Dominican/Mulatto hair sway far past her shoulders. I was not beautiful because I did not care which direction my hair grew, and I howled like a beast when the "R" word was brought into the discussion. I was not beautiful because I am Jamaican and moppy and won't grow to be anything beautiful. They taught me that without beauty, I had no value.

This is, in fact, the same family that only bought me black Barbie dolls that I would promptly throw away because I thought they weren't pretty. The same family that argued about what long-assassinated brown men did or did not say at their rallies in Washington DC. The same family slammed their fists in the white-clothed oak table shouting, "Where is my 40 acres and mule?" A Great-Grandfather that was so scarred and mangled by the fists and sharp words of his white commanders and lieutenant, he would never dream of allowing a white man into his home. Yet these "strong and independent" black women insisted in the torture of our hair. They passed down the hot comb, so that each new generation could be beautiful the way they thought beauty should be: long, bone-straight,

slick hair. They passed on a tool to make us turn our back against the thing they claimed they were so proud to be.

Malcolm X used to conk his hair. For over 40 years, black men took the corrosive lye, mixed it with potatoes and eggs and smoothed the chemical into their hair to obtain hair similar to that of white men. In his autobiography, Malcolm talks about the first time he got a conk and, on reflection, how stupid he was to literally burn away his flesh, hair, and identity as an African American man for the sake of...who? Himself perhaps, to feel less inferior to white people? Perhaps he thought maybe if he looked more like the white man, he would be more beautiful, and therefore be worth something. A lot of his generation seems to think that way and put that criticism on black teenage girls like me.

He had an epiphany and so did I. Looking back on his lifestyle, he couldn't fathom why he would give white people back the metaphorical whip, to go through pain and jump through hoops to please someone who was above him. And I grasped something similar but on a different plane. Do I let my mother relax my hair because I am ashamed? Or do I relax my hair to escape the judgment of my family and the ridicule of my peers. This relaxed hair that my mother fights me tooth and nail for, that I scream wail and endure is supposed to make me feel more beautiful, pretty, like a black woman, when in reality I feel lowly. I feel like I've lost the fight because in the end no one thinks I'm prettier. I'm still sitting here blind and burning.

And so then you start to wonder. Do all little black girls have a mother, aunt, grandma, cousin that tells her what being black and beautiful is supposed to look like? That the dark hair should flow past your shoulders, at the least, and if it doesn't you better save up to buy hair that does? MTV and BET tell them, and then these women relay the message to you, that you can't be skinny but not too fat either. Unless you're funny; then, being fat is okay, though you'll never be pretty enough to have someone want you. And the only way to attract a man is with a big booty and high yellow skin, or else he'll find a white woman instead. It eventually turns into a big hassle. Why be

black if there are all these limitations and regulations to be considered desirable, valuable, wanted, loved? These ideals have been floating around in the culture for decades; the older and supposedly wiser ones still enforce these unwritten rules as if they were commandments to live by. The part that I find even stranger about black women is why we are so ashamed to look the way we are intended to. I supposed we've just been conditioned to see only one type of woman as beautiful. And she isn't brown.

Right now, I am a black girl. And one day I will be a black woman. One day I'll probably have kids, perhaps a daughter who will look to me and want to know what beautiful is and how to make the world see her as something desirable, pretty, valuable. And I will be the one to break the cycle. The torturous heirlooms that were passed from Douglas to Douglas to Brown, will never see another Brown. I will smile and tell her that people will try to sway her, misguide her and judge her; they will point and laugh and belittle her. I will tell her how I cut away all of my hair and how the people who were supposed to love me most mocked me and made me the punch-line of their jokes. And I will tell her how her worth can never be measured by beauty.

But for right now, I'm still a black girl, and I refuse to be left blind and burning anymore.

*If found, please read.*

*Apples on a Lemon Tree (ALT)* is a collective of writers and artists from the Renaissance community. We publish individual pieces of student work, collaborations / split issues, and *Apples Annual*, a year-end anthology of student writing.

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