To Love Again: A Natural Hair Journey

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1. I WAS DATING SOMEONE WHO ONE MORNING ASKED ME WHY I hadn't been wrapping my hair at night. He's white, radically feminist, and—brace yourself—a philosophy major. I was paralyzed. I muffled my response along the line of, "Oh, I just forgot it!" and he gave me a look that seemed to say, so you're always just *forgetting it* and I gave him a look that definitely said, *you're tapping into my insecurities right now, leave this one alone.* So, we left it alone. I was embarrassed he knew that, by the law-making surviving rules of my ancestors, I'm supposed to wrap my hair at night. I was also relieved. Truthfully, I never forgot my bonnet. It was always in my bag. Sometimes when he fell asleep, I would wrap my hair, and, in the morning, I'd wake before him, hide it back in my bag, or in the crack between the bed and the wall. I remember going home after that morning and I cried. I knew immediately that the relationship would end, because, how could I be with someone when so many parts of who I was made me so uncomfortable. And even after I started wrapping my hair around him, it didn't matter: we both knew about me what we knew about me.

2. When I was a kid, an agent approached my parents and I and told us she could make me the next big thing. My immigrant parents gave this woman two thousand dollars for a headshot, acting classes, and representation. At the photoshoot, there was a make-up artist who couldn't figure out my complexion and a hairdresser who actually said, "Maybe your mom can do it?" I remember how delicately she pulled strands of my hair, not so much like she cared about not hurting me, but like she didn't want to hurt herself. The pictures were taken, uploaded on my agent's website, and within a month, I had my first audition. The room was filled with skinny mothers and their skinny blonde daughters, with perfectly silky straight hair and brightly-coloured tops. The daughters would read their one line to the mothers, over and over again, and the mothers would convince them that they were born to say this one line. My mother was wearing her scrubs, and I was helping her translate reports for work. I didn't get the part.

The pictures were printed and mailed to my house. I took one good look at

them and said: this is it. This is why I hadn't been cast: in the pictures, my hair had already begun to puff up again into its original state, a crunched up fro, like a tiny cloud. The end of my hair was like cotton candy, while the rest of it held on to its dear straight life. I had only permed my hair once before, in 2004, when I was a flower girl for a wedding. My scalp had dried out so badly, Mother and I had agreed we wouldn't do that again. But I was going to be an actress now, by any means necessary. After a week of begging, the JUST FOR ME relaxing kit was on my dresser. Two hours later, my hair was chemically straightened, styled downwards, and trimmed. I was ready.

Months went by, and my agent hadn't called. I learned that perming your hair was a temporary fix. More months went by and I permed it again. And then three months later, again. My mother would always tell me, "The minute it starts to burn, say something." It would begin to burn after a minute or so. But the instructions said to wait at least ten to fifteen minutes for the perm to work. Each time, I waited. And sucked on my thumb to counter the pain. With each treatment, the chemicals would thin out my hair, my scalp would dry out and bleed in the following days; it burned to stand underneath the sun. I didn't get another audition until a year later. My family had moved to Oshawa, by then, and I was now enrolled to a school that resembled the casting waiting room.

3. Every year for Christmas, I asked Santa for hair. It was an empty wish. I knew my parents couldn't afford the quality I wanted, but I was an optimist, a dreamer. Whenever my mother and I talked about this, the people I was hanging out with, or why hair was so important to me, I told her it was because I wanted to blend in. And then, one Christmas, Santa came through: my first set of Brazilian Remy. The hair was spectacular. It moved when I moved; jumped when I jumped. I couldn't wait to show off my new-year, new-me look. It was in English when a classmate cleared his throat and said, "Hey, everyone, we all got gifts for Christmas . . . Téa got hair." The class erupted in this laughter—it was that scene in *Lion King*, you know the one. I remember once, a braiding piece was found in the hallway, and the same guy picked it up, walked up to several black girls and said, "I think you dropped something." This was the same guy who once walked into class with a ripped shoe and said to me directly, "Now I look like one of your people." He pulled the top off to reveal his toes sticking out. I told him, "My people can't afford socks!" and he gave me a bump. He

said it was cool I could take a joke. We were reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and it wasn't funny. Each time, the class laughed. And each time, I did too.

4. When I was fourteen, I interviewed at a popular restaurant in North Oshawa. A woman phoned a few days later and offered me the job. This was in the summer and, typically, I wore braids to have easier access to my scalp. I'd spent those two months out of school reading, writing and oiling my head in front of the TV. I didn't like wearing braids. It was difficult to audition with them, as they were seen as being, "too Black," or worse, "too African," and casting directors usually wanted, ahem, diversity within their black people. At some point, I don't remember when, I began to agree. And the thought of looking too black—at the high school, in the white, newly developed suburban neighbourhood I lived in—began to make me feel self-conscious. The messages were being fed to me over and over again, most especially in acting classes and by my agent. "With braids you can only, *really*, be cast as an African character instead of . . . a black character," something verbatim I was told.

Later, when I would begin to bartend, a regular conversation with men always went:

"No way, you're African? You're too pretty to be African?"

"Excuse me?"

"You just don't look African?"

"What does African look like?"

"I don't know. I thought you were Guyanese or from an island, or something . . . exotic."

I understood that there was a difference between African black girls and Caribbean black girls. People would say, "You have soft features, soft hair." And that was the difference. Coarseness. Blackness. Softness.

At work, I was particularly in love with a biracial girl who was twenty and who experimented with her hair. Sometimes it was blonde, other times it was pink, and once, a neon green. She was the kind of unapologetic that sometimes got her labelled as ghetto. One day, the manager told us we were changing the rules on hair. "No weird haircuts, no unnatural colours, no funny business." He said he wanted hair to be pulled back in a bun, something my hair couldn't naturally do without being blown-dried, pressed, and gelled down. A month later, I got my first paycheck and spent it on a professional salon quality straightener.

5. During prom season, my best friend at the time went and got her hair done at her uncle's hair salon. I was in the bathroom gluing pieces of extensions to my head. Senior year was the year I made friends. I had spent the summer leading up to that year working full-time and investing in extensions, braids, clips, accessories, the works. At school, everybody would ask to touch it. Everybody would ask if it was real. And each time, I'd say yes. They ran their fingers through the end of my extensions and asked how I had gotten it so straight. For a few months, I really got the sense that I was becoming one of them. Prom season came to remind me of our differences. Girls booked joint make-up, nail and hair appointments, none of which I could attend because a hair day took several hours and anyways, it was near impossible to find a black hair salon in Oshawa. I felt like I was missing a rite of passage by being home alone, getting ready while they were out there together. So much of prom seemed to be the chaos of it all, the obstacles, the drama, the mimosas that started at noon. It was an experience I shared with myself, while watching their BlackBerry status updates.

6. I learned to braid myself by binge-watching re-runs of *That's So Raven*. I wanted to be like her so bad. I would have been twelve or thirteen. My sisters were getting older, and I lost priority in the hair department, so I just started practicing on Barbies. I'd wait for the hair to get old and dusty, so it could mimic my own texture. Raven Symone was the first person of colour I remember seeing on television. Whenever Raven would change her hair, I'd try to match it; I idolized her. At school I would do the Raven pause: stop mid-way through a sentence, bringing my hand up and freezing. I would tell people their future. I was the captain of the improv team throughout my entire elementary career and people were quite supportive of me as an actor. My preferred genre in literature and art had always been comedy and musicals. I was known for singing and being this up-beat personality, no matter the wreckage. Whenever I turned a sour moment into a positive one, my first boyfriend in the fifth grade would say, "That's So Téa!" I loved it so much.

The night I found out Raven Symone was half-white, I was heartbroken. There was a clear divide between light-skinned blacks, and dark-skinned blacks, and light skins who were half-white. There was a "them" and an "us" within this marginalized group of "others." The half-white ones were the girls who got cast as secondary characters in shows. Because my little sister is light-skinned and my little brother is

half-white but side by side, they were so similar in skin tone, I didn't pay attention to the details. But something about finding out that Raven Symone was half-white affected me. I thought to myself, *is that what it takes?* Not limited to being an actor but just to being.

Once, when we were grocery shopping at the black people store on Morningside and Kingston, I stole bleaching cream. The instructions said to test the formula on part of your body first, so I rubbed it on my knees. I rubbed it for weeks, waiting for a result. I rubbed until I finished the entire bottle. Nothing happened. My knees are still as dark today as they've always been. But for a few months, I was under a placebo. If Raven had twists, I had twists, if Raven had curly hair, I got a curly weave. I couldn't wait for the cream to work on my knees so that I could apply it on the rest of my body.

7. Somehow, I ended up auditioning for one of the biggest talent agents in Canada. A few months before this meeting, I had gotten new headshots. In them, I was seventeen with massive boobs and, honestly, great hair. By the time of the meeting, I was in between hairstyles. My mother gave me this pulled back, gelled back chiffon look to make me look more professional. My parents were in the meeting with me. We talked, all three of us like old pals out for coffee, and then my parents were asked to leave. I read my lines. The agent told me I was great with a lot of potential, but he wouldn't be signing me. He pulled up the picture from my headshots, and he said, "This girl, this girl is the girl next door. This is the girl I was hoping to meet today." That picture was all boobs, all long flowy hair. And sitting on that chair, he told me I didn't have *the* look.

8. By the time I was twenty, my hair was completely damaged. I began wearing wigs, closures, and to my biggest dismay, more braids. Saving my hair became more stressful and more important than an empty acting career, than going out with friends, than showing up to work on time, or to my lectures looking presentable. I wore a black beanie for two years straight. It became my signature look. (Friends actually bought me beanies as gifts because I legitimately wouldn't take it off.) I was living by myself by then, and despite having a job since I was fourteen, I was incredibly broke, drinking too much and doing all of the drugs. I made too much money waitressing and spent it all on the same thing: hair, alcohol, drugs, rent, repeat. I

was in Scarborough again, but my friends were still predominantly white. By then, I was far more comfortable with white people than anybody else, and being back in Scarborough, I experienced a late culture shock of a newly arrived immigrant. There's nothing wrong with hanging out with *just* white people, or whatever. But the thing that scares me today is looking back at my life history and wondering if, perhaps, I never wanted to be an actress, that perhaps, I just wanted to be white. What do you make of a little girl who dreams all the right dreams but is convinced she's dreaming it from the wrong body? Love to my mother, but immigrant parents don't have time to teach their children how to love themselves after they spend their childhood moving from one foreign place to another.

9. I made my first set of black friends when I was twenty-one. We lived in a house with eight girls, and four of us were black. This felt like my first time seeing black women in action, despite having been raised in a black household. My family was so cultured and so religious, blackness and being black wasn't something we talked about because we had God and that's all we needed. Being in that house felt like being in the world. The girls who weren't black were Indian, Hispanic, Arabic, and Asian. My roommates, especially Metty, taught me about African diaspora, slavery, socialism, blackness, feminism, and so on. I watched (and loved) African films for the first time. I celebrated black history month (my high school didn't). In turn, I offered my knowledge on hair. The kindness among us four was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I especially liked when we cooked food from our respective countries (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Congo). I had this new-found confidence when I interacted with the world outside of our house. Being with them felt like a voice was suddenly telling me, *it's okay to be black*. It was similar to the feelings I had when I lived on Galloway. I had this never-before-known appreciation of the black woman, by way of strength, by way of discourse and experience. Metty and I went on to live together for three extra years. In that time, I made a promise to myself to only read black women authors. And I could feel it spiritually, how much my life was immediately changing.

10. I started writing my first book, a collection of short stories that deals primarily with womanhood, sexuality, friendship, and trauma when I was twenty-three. Funny enough, I don't touch on hair, not even a little bit. Sometimes I look at my

book as a life I might have had. Sometimes, I look at it like a hyperreal, alternative reality of the life I did have. Sometimes, it feels like one big old cautionary tale, unrelated to me. There is only one thing I see in Loli, my protagonist, that I see in myself. Loli has lived a full life not knowing how to love herself. While writing, I kept asking myself: what does it mean to be black, and girl, or black and woman, or black and alive. I went back and visited the neighbourhood of Galloway where I lived as a child. I sat on the curb and wrote many parts of my book in front of my family's old unit. Sometimes, I'd approach a little girl and ask her about her day, her life. Often, they'd tell me that they liked my hair. Or that they thought I was pretty. And I'd lean in and tell them I like theirs, coarse, in cornrows, soft. I'm like this with every black little girl I see. I tell them I like their hair; I tell them I want to do mine like theirs. I tell them I think they're the smartest person on this entire bus, yes, out of everyone here, you are the most intelligent. I tell them I want to be them when they grow up. And I tell them that they are important. And then I look up at their mothers, their eyes sometimes tired, sometimes aware of what I am doing, and in their faces, I'd see my own mama. I would have done anything to grow up in the era of black girl magic. I would have done anything to have an older sister, a naturalist YouTuber, anyone brave and radical enough to offer the teaching of "love yourself, love your hair," in a world that taught black peoples not to.

13. Here it is, then: I am twenty-five years old, and four months ago, just as I was getting ready to say goodbye to the youngest age I'll ever be again, I walked out of my house, natural hair and all, for the first time in forever. Barefaced, no make-up, no scarf, no wig, no cover-up. Hair not really blowing in the wind but the hair I was born with. To anybody else, this might not seem like much, but to me, to black women—who have internalized self-hatred, racism, violence—it feels like a declaration of self-love. I'm still not entirely sure what inspired that change. I don't know if it was the recent break-up, if it was the publication of my book, if it was the year I spent watching a YouTuber's hair journey, I don't know if it was reconnecting with my mother. But one day I woke up, I called my hairdresser and with a voice more confident than ever before, I said, cut it, "all of it, we're starting over, and we're going to heal."