Hair

It’s Just Hot Hair, Baby...

Kimberlyn Jeffries

BEFORE YOU READ: Do your beauty treatments cause you pain? How much pain are you willing to feel for beauty? Read the “pull quotes” in large type. What do you think this story will be about? What is the point of “pull quotes”? What function do they serve for the article?

Every Saturday, when I was a child, my dad would wake me and my sister up to an early breakfast and send us next door to Ms. Robidiah’s house. She was the neighborhood hairdresser. Back in those days, that’s what they called them, instead of hair stylist. They could work in a salon, or they could work from their kitchen, like Ms. Robidiah did. I guess that is why black people started the term “kitchen do.” My sister and I had a standing appointment every Saturday, and my father paid for this service.

I would always be the first one to run through the door and head straight to the kitchen where I would find a chair facing the kitchen sink. Ms. Robidiah would say to me, “Come on big girl, climb up here. Ms. Robidiah gonna make you pretty today.” I would smile so wide. Ms. Robidiah would wash our hair in her kitchen sink. “Bend yo head over the sink, child,” she would call out in a motherly tone while running the warm water on my hair and scalp. Then she would shampoo our hair. When finished, she would have me sit in the chair where she would comb through my kinky hair, parting and separating it into sections as she placed oil along the line of each parted section, continuing this process until my entire scalp had oil on it.

All the while, my sister would be sitting nearby waiting her turn, crying as if it was time to go and see the grim reaper. Because she was very tender-headed, she was never happy to have her hair combed. During this process my mind would drift, and I would imagine how...

Vocabulary

The Grim Reaper
is the personification of death.

A kink is a sharp bend or twist. Kinky hair is very curly.

To pay a compliment means to say something nice about someone.
pretty my hair was going to be. Also, I would wonder whose hair would be the longest, mine or my sister’s.

After completing the washing and oiling of my scalp Ms. Robidiah would pull out a pressing comb and place it on the stove over medium-high heat. Then she began parting my hair into small sections and combing through my hair with the hot comb. I could smell my hair sizzling and burning from all the oil she had put on my scalp. The smell of burning hair would overpower any of the breakfast smells left over from earlier that morning. I kept thinking about how pretty I would look when she was done. I was so excited! That hour felt like forever to a little six-year-old.

After getting our hair fixed, my sister and I would race to the mirror and admire our freshly straightened hair. Then we would stretch our locks to see which sister’s hair was longer. Well, hers was always longer.

We continued to go to Ms. Robidiah until one day my dad told us that she was moving away. I felt sad. I thought, “Who will fix my hair so pretty? Will I still be the big girl who climbs up on the kitchen chair every Saturday? Will I still be the pretty girl whose hair goes from kinky to straight in the magic hands of a hairdresser?”

My oldest sister took on the task of fixing our hair. But she would constantly burn us with the hot comb and yell at us to keep still. My sister and I would scream out in pain, “Ouch, sister that hurts!” and she would reply to us, “It’s just hot hair, baby; it’s just hot hair.” This went on for the entire time she would be pressing our hair.

Later, our forehead, neck, and ears would all have burn marks on them. Even with all the pain she caused us, when she was done, we would race to the mirror to get a closer look at our new kitchen hairdos, and we felt so pretty and stylish.

We would have the biggest smiles on our faces for the rest of the day. Everywhere we went, people would compliment us on our hair.

Our stylish hair gave us confidence and self-esteem. It made us feel beautiful. To this day, my sister and I, as well as other black women, will sit through the severe pain of pulling, scalp burns, and headaches in order to look good. Having our hair done gives us black women a sense of beauty, sophistication, and pride.

So when you see a black woman with her hair fixed nicely, pay her a compliment. It makes her feel good. And just know that she probably went through a lot of pain to get there.

**AFTER YOU READ:**

1. Share something that surprised you about this story.
2. What did the girls in this story get in exchange for the pain they endured?
3. Do you think black girls and women have different experiences than white girls and women when it comes to the process of trying to look “beautiful”? Why or why not?
4. How does beauty get defined? Who or what influences our ideas of beauty?

**Vocabulary Extra Credit**

Look up the word “complement.” What does it mean? Use it and “compliment” in different sentences.

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*Kimberlyn Jeffries was born in 1964 in Houston, Texas, to the proud parents of 10 kids. She has 7 brothers and 2 sisters. Her dad relocated the family to Oakland, CA, in June of 1967 for work. He got a job in construction making $5.50 per hour. She has never lived anywhere else.*