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My Life in Hair

Afro

At six years old, I stand proud and beam into the camera's flash, clutching my toy tightly. My pillow stuffing hair makes a halo around my head, angelic young eyes emboldened and bright. I've just lost my first baby tooth and Momma smiles from behind the lens, says I'm getting to be a big girl soon. I want to be big like the girls in the reggae music videos. She says not that kind of big. I don't care. I'll be big soon, Momma.

Twin Beads Ponytail

The bald man collects drops of water on his forehead as he tells me to move my hand slightly to the left. Momma combed my hair up tight with the special oil for picture day. She put my favorite clear bead hair tie in, and the rest of it falls in a soft, malleable braid. The oil leaves my forehead shiny, but Momma calls it natural oil and says it's good for me. Another camera flash and I sit up straight, crossing my legs like the old ladies at church, with the hats of netting and the big flowers on their chests and the fans and the "oh, lord"s and the "tell them, pastor"s. Momma let me wear one of her shirts, the length of a dress on my tiny body. It's hot in the

picture room and the fabric clings to my skin, oil and sweat clashing. I don't mind. I'll be big soon, and I'll fit into Momma's shirts.

Afro Puffs

I bound into the house on a Friday afternoon, exhaust fumes from the bus still making me cough. My head feels light, two afro puffs juxtaposed on either side of my head, whispering excited messages to each other through my middle part. The inside of the house smells like the hair care stores Momma takes me to on the bad side of town. I always stay in aisle with all the colorful beads, but I know the odor well. I attempt to sneak into Momma's powder room to watch her work her magic from a distance, but my light-up sneakers are a dead giveaway. Momma turns at the sound of squeaking on tile, smiling through gritted teeth as she spreads the foul-smelling white paste on her hair. "Hi, baby girl!" she sings, but I can see through the facade. She doesn't like the smell either, but she does it to look pretty for her job. Momma taught me you need to look like a lady at jobs. I don't know why Momma's regular hair don't look like a lady. She calls me her little lady, and my hair is bold and soft, not muted and flat. I twirl in the bathroom, showing Momma my new bedazzled Baby Phat jacket. Aycee says "phat" is a word for cool. My jacket is cool. My sneakers are cool. My hair is cool. I can poof it up wayyyyy big 'till I'm tall like my Momma. She calls me her little Diana, after Diana Ross, the pretty lady on the jazz CD. I'll be big soon, and I'll be like Diana.

Beaded Cornrows

Cl-clack. One. Cl-clack. Two. Cl....clack. The third sit-up was the hardest, but I did it anyway. Mommy said I was getting a little bigger so I needed to work extra hard in gym class. I didn't mind. Here, the small beads at the end of my cornrows clicked the loudest, like maracas on a microphone. I ran my laps around the gym, asthma kicking in and sucking in air. I get my strength from my hair, like Samson did, which Bishop Johnson taught us last Sunday. I'd never do anything to hurt my hair, lest I lose the eyes of God and lose my strength. No haircuts, no chemicals, no Delilahs to take my power away. *Cl-clack, cl-clack, cl-clack.* Flurries of black, yellow and green whip around my head. Mommy let me do the Jamaican beads this time, since last week had to be silver and white to look nice for Take Your Kid to Work Day. I went to Mommy's big office in New York City. The other ladies in the office had hair like my mommy, straight and flat and long. I *cl-clacked* my hair into every conversation and every cubicle. A couple of strangers played with my beads. Mommy says I'm not supposed to let strangers touch me, especially my hair. I'll be big soon, and no Delilah will ever take my power.

The Straightening: Part 1

Amanda and Brielle and all the pretty popular girls from the neighborhood said they could come to my sleepover! Everything needed to be perfect. I'd make them a spa in my basement; Brielle liked nails and Amanda only liked nice things. I made mini magazines online and set up a waiting room like in Mommy's nail salon. There were tiny sandwiches like Mommy's meetings with the ladies who looked like us, who had hair like me. I liked those ladies, but they didn't go to my school. Amanda and Brielle did, and they only like girls with hair like Mommy. I asked Mommy if she could make my hair like hers, and her eyes got real big

like Daddy's boiled dumplings. She used this magic wand in my hair. It felt really hot, but Mommy was a wizard so I let her cast her spell. *Alakazam!* I looked in the mirror to a new face. A face like the Delilahs at the big New York Office. A face like Brielle and Amanda standing on the corner. A face like Mommy. I'll be big soon, and I'll be a lady.

Box Braids

I can't lift my neck. Mommy took me to the bad side of town. She's sending me away to camp for a while. I've gotten even bigger and she wants me to take charge. But they have two heated pools there, and my Brielle hair won't last against the moisture and the mountain air. So she took me to some ladies without ladylike hair and sat me in a chair. Mommy gave the kind-of lady packs of hair the same color as mine and for seven hours I sat in a chair while the strangers moved their fingers around my head. I kept track by the 30-minute reruns of Everybody Hates Chris playing on the crappy TV. After the last episode played, I looked in the mirror to see someone different. Not like Diana, or like Mommy. Not even like me. There was so much hair that I couldn't see who I was, as I drowned in synthetics. The color was supposed to be mine. None of it felt like it belonged to me. I staggered my way out of the chair, unable to hold the weight of another person on my shoulders. I had stolen someone else's power. Mommy taught me not to steal. Am I big now, Mom?

The Straightening: Part 2

Mom shears the identity theft off of my head at the end of a month, braids fraying and succumbing to gravity. There I sat, with natural hair splayed across my skull and sour cream

seeping into the tortilla in front of me as Mom informs me that I'm about to be ripped from all I've ever known. I quietly asked to be excused from the dinner table, excused from the apparent red flag of an allotted three scoops of sour cream, excused from the shock. That night, as I lay sideways in my bed, surrounded by newly-painted walls, a tangerine now turned vomit color, the tears streamed down the sides of my face, running across the bridge of my nose and nestling themselves in my hair. There, they warped the hair into tangles and curled knots, a ticket to the little girl days of yore. I shot up and gave myself whiplash at the mere thought of regressing, resolving that this was a job for a lady. I'm supposed to be big already, and I don't look like a lady.

Box Braids: In Technicolor

I missed being able to put on someone else's power. It was useful when I felt weak. The people in my new school who I clung to drained my energy. I met people who I thought were angels turned out to be Delilahs, attacking me to cut down my power. They called me names like Oreos, like I was black on the outside and white on the inside. I spoke like the Brielles and Amandas of the world, but I could never be them. My chocolate cookie skin would keep the world from ever seeing me as the saccharine cream that lay underneath. I wanted the weight of someone else on my neck, but this time brighter. I didn't want to be Oreo, to be me. I begged Mom for the braids again, this time with more color. I was big now, and big girls could dye their hair. I warped my image into Violent Violet, Blazing Blue and Roaring Red, each color heavier than the last atop my head. Each new identity sparking a hunger to carry another. I'm big now, and I want to be disappear.

Afro: The Sequel

The identity was sheared once again, this time late at night, and Mom's aching fingers didn't want to use the magic wand. The spell expired at midnight, and I was no longer someone else. I was no longer Brielle or Amanda, or the office CEOs of New York. Staring at the hand mirror, cracked and stained with detangler, I saw myself. A face I hadn't seen in years, surrounded by pillow stuffing hair, only something was different. I felt better. I felt light, the weight removed. I shook my hair back and forth and let the curls flick either side of my face, staining my glasses with oil droplets. I missed this. This light feeling, like I could take on the world. That my careful steps became bounds. The time of bedazzled jackets floated back into my mind, lifting my spirit to the height of afro puffs of school years past. I'm big now, and I can be who I want to be.

The Straightening: The Final Chapter

I twist limp strands of hair between my forefinger and thumb, grasping the tangled, curly bits in the other hand. I watch my friends submit applications to new homes, traveling across the country and splintering my soul in every cardinal direction. I am a mere seven months from being real big, like you Momma. I've been faux-big for a while now. I wanted to be like you much too quickly, and I broke my promises. I let Delilahs steal my power. Diana is unrecognizable to me. I silenced the messages that used to travel across my scalp, attempting to be like the Brielles of the world. Now I'm almost big, and I don't want to be. I want pillow stuffing hair and my toys and my Baby Phat jackets back. I want to smile proud into the flash,

not let its power blind me to who I am like I have for many years. I'm big, Momma. I don't want to be big.