



# GETTING BACK TO MY ROOTS

***My mom is black, my dad is white, so where does that leave me—and my hair?***

By Maya Rock

EVERY MORNING BEFORE SCHOOL, I'd sit on the floor, leaning against the couch between my mother's legs, while she yanked a brush through my biracial snarls. My tight-but-not-quite-Afro curls left my black mother, whose own hair was closely cropped, puzzled over its care. So for a long time, I had two fat Pippi Longstocking braids, held in place by hair ties with decorative fluorescent sparkly balls at their ends. Then, around age 10, my mother switched me to a more mature single braid with a green velvet scrunchie that tried to make this style cool.

I looked forward to the rare occasions—weekly shampoos, along with holidays and family gatherings—when my hair was let out in all its glory. It was a thick, long, indefinable mass of curls that had been uncoiled by the pull of its own weight. The top was dry and frizzy. I couldn't run my

fingers through it without hitting tangles. Still, I envisioned my hair to have the romantic waves Helena Bonham Carter wore in *A Room With a View*—given the right styling help. When I even proudly told a white friend that I had naturally wavy hair, she was dubious. "Stop pretending you're different; your hair is straight."

There was no way to tell from the braid. Although the idea of a half-black girl with straight hair may seem preposterous, the truth is most people have trouble accepting that I'm black. Including me. My skin is far lighter than my mother's. As a child, I grew used to people mistaking her for my nanny or house-

keeper. Sometimes I wished I never had to introduce her to people, just to avoid their embarrassing confusion. It was an identity crisis that ran much deeper than the roots of my hair.

Compared to most black girls' kinks, my chameleon curls counted as "good hair" because of its supposed manageability. But what passed as good hair in the black world still didn't cut it in the white one. If my hair were kinkier, I could delve into my mother's complex universe of black haircare, full of code words like *relaxer*, *no-lye*, and *curl-activator*. Rejected by both sides, I made a bid for hair independence. And upon entering middle school, I demanded my first cut.

Black hair isn't cut; it breaks off. My mother, who got her hair buzzed at a black barbershop, consulted white coworkers to figure out where to go for this momentous event. The stylist, the first in a long line who wasn't quite sure how to handle my in-between mixed-race hair, shaped a block around my head that resembled an unruly hedge. My hair went from touching the bottom of my back to only a few inches below my shoulders. The curls sprung up, their burden lightened. It didn't really seem wavy; it seemed *mangled*.

I went home and tried brushing it into shape. Unresponsive to my efforts, my hair just seemed to grow drier and frizzier with each stroke. I had hoped the unveiling of its natural beauty would usher in a new era for me, one in which I could participate in the popular school rituals of bun-twisting and the trading of

toothy butterfly clips. But my new hair was openly mocked. I became more alien than ever.

I didn't have anyone I could turn to for guidance. Even when the frizz was kept to a minimum, my hair most closely resembled that of Cree Summer, who played the scatterbrained character on *A Different World*. But these were the days of Jennifer Aniston's poker-straight hair. I wanted to

look like a Friend. Unfortunately, my mother, who still cherished an article written in her college newspaper about >>

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her early adoption of the Afro, discouraged the use of a hair dryer or flatiron. Her belief in going natural led her to always push me to make my own decisions, in life as well as with my looks. She was a shoulder to cry on when classmates poked fun, but she was resistant to helping me change my hair.

So I walked by myself to the neighborhood drugstore, where I found a multiplicity of gels and serums to shellac my hair with. I only skimmed my mother's lineup of products underneath her bathroom sink—mysterious goos in bottles with African queen silhouettes on them. I didn't bother trying them, because I didn't think they applied to me.

DURING COLLEGE, I relied on short cuts to cover up the fact that I still had no idea what I was doing when it came to my brambles. Sometimes I found that my messed-up hair, along with my ethnicity, was championed as a sign of difference. I smiled weakly when my white boyfriend lovingly declared in our junior year, "I'll never meet anyone as half-black as you." But despite the approval from a man, I didn't feel very sexy or cool. I no longer had the braids, but I was still out of place.

After my last chop before graduation, I let my hair grow and went back to simply pulling it out of sight. The Ponytail Solution, sadly, was just a grown-up version of the Braid Solution. As I identified myself more and more as a business professional, I turned to Japanese hair-straightening. I now had the curtain of hair I'd dreamed of. It simply fell into place every morning. I'd easily shaken off my parents' and friends' nostalgia for my curly hair, and had really grown to love the straight version. But it was a relationship built on a lie. I knew I couldn't afford the time or the money it would cost to maintain. My curly roots pushed to the surface quickly, and I was left with a sloppy half-halo of frizziness that tapered limp at the ends.

I got all the straightened hair chopped off last year. Splurging on an upscale salon that specializes in curly hair, I got the cute, short Halle Berry cut. The resemblance between my mother and me was suddenly stronger. Perhaps we had more in common than I had imagined.

Last year, my mother handed me a white bottle with blue writing that spelled out "S-Curl," a product from Chicago,

From top: The author with a short crop at 2; sporting her signature braids; with a manageable cut as a college sophomore; showing off her wild waves after graduating; and today (right).

appropriate for relaxed or natural hair. "Try this," she said casually. "I sometimes use it when my hair gets a little long."

I was skeptical, but gave it a shot. Unlike my usual products, there was absolutely no claim about getting rid of frizz. There was the African silhouette at the corner of the ingredient list, and the motto was pretty unsexy: "No drip." But unlike so many products I had used, rather than fight the curl, it enhanced and shaped it.

Nowadays, it's the only product I use. I feel as if my hair and I have reached a wondrous détente. Ultimately, my hair can only be what it is. This same truth applies to who I am—whether a biracial kid at a prep school or a quirky girl making jokes during the workday. To flourish, I've learned, it helps to accept. *mc*

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