

HAIR: THE COMBING OUT

by Joyce Chediac Wilcox

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I come home from work and there you are, 12 years old and my daughter for 4 years. I admire your profile, silhouetted against the window as you sit at the computer. There is your small, spunky nose, your mouth slightly parted in concentration, your well-shaped head, the neat bangs and ponytail. You are wearing your official "at home" clothes--no shoes or socks, no jeans, one of your giant tee shirts reaching midway down your brown legs.

"Mom, I'll give you the rest of my allowance. Can I order Chinese food for dinner? Please?"

I walk over and you peer up at me. Your brown eyes are glassy, and one is swollen partly closed. In them I read hunger and exhaustion. Last night you had an asthma attack, and it took many medicines and much time before you could sleep. School must have been hard for you today. I decide to throw in the extra few bucks for Chinese food. You deserve a treat.

I make myself an omelet. Your Chinese food arrives. We sit and eat. You are over-hungry, and laugh as you accidently spray more soy sauce outside your plate than on it.

"I want to interview you about your hair," I say.

"Why me? Interview Pop."

"He never thinks about his hair. It's short and boring."

You laugh, your hunger dropsies continuing. "I have a piece of pork between my toes!"

The meal over, we do our chores. I change into jeans, enter your room and sit on your bed, pen and yellow legal pad in hand. You are standing in front of the dresser and, no surprise, doing your hair.

"Why do you spend so much time doing your hair?"

"I want to look nice. You should know that by now, Mom."

You arrange a bun, adding a bright pink scrunchy, which frills around the bound hair like a party dress.

"But it's not just to look nice because you're always changing your hair. Now you're going to ask me to part your hair."

You turn to me wide-eyed. "How did you know that?"

I laugh.

"Oh well, now I'm *not* going to ask you to do it."

I jot all this down.

"What are you writing?"

"Everything you say." You give me a look through the mirror.

"Why do you spend so much time on your hair?" I persist.

"Because it's fun!" You turn to me, animated, "You know what I'd really like to do? Take my head off and do my hair, and then put my head back on again." You take out the bun and part your hair down the center. "Is that part straight?"

"Pretty good!"

"Pretty good is not good enough," you say.

"What is the first conscious thoughts you had about your hair," I press again.

"I don't know! When I had those two things on my head," you say, touching the top of your head where "those two things" were.

"When did you start thinking about your hair?"

"When I got those knots out."

"Why didn't you let people comb your hair?"

"Because it hurt, Mom. It hurt. You know that."

I continue writing.

"Write this: I'm about to kill my mother if she doesn't leave my room, okay Mom?"

"Can you talk to me about this tomorrow?"

"No."

"You'll be famous if you let me interview you. That's what you've always wanted."

"I want them to know about me," you say, pointing to a poster over your bed of your favorite hunks, three very young rappers, all in sunglasses, the major hunk gripping his crotch.

"But they're only three people, honey. I'm talking about making you really famous."

You don't believe me. I am making rather extravagant promises. "Get out of my room." You pick up your pole lamp, making like you'll run me through with it. I leave laughing and writing.

Hair. When I began this piece I did not know that I would be writing it to you, or that you would decide to call it your "life story."

I remember when Paul and I first met you, our daughter-to be. You were small for eight. Your brown skin was scrubbed to a shine, and your nappy hair was parted in the middle and done in two top knots, one on either side of your head.

Soon we took you to the beach. I could not return you to foster care covered with sand, so I bathed you and washed your hair. Underneath the smoothly combed exterior I found a mass of giant knots. I did not know Black hair, and arranging it was like traveling in a foreign country. I did the best I could, then brought you back to the projects.

Mrs. Jefferson, the portly grandmother currently caring for you, opened the door and shoed you in. Embarrassed, I explained over the drone of her TV and the small children playing in the hall that I had trouble doing your hair.

"That child's hair is filled with knots," Mrs. Jefferson said, shaking her head from side to side and clicked her tongue. "She don't let nobody do her hair. Didn't she holler?"

Well, you didn't, not yet....

The agency wouldn't let us adopt you until you had a major eye operation. We got you two days after the five-hour surgery. It was the worst possible situation. You were panicked over the pain as well as the adoption.

I learned parenting by total submersion--quitting my job and caring for you full-time while you recovered. For two weeks we were locked in the house together in a ritual of bathing stitches, applying eye creams, administering Tylenol and watching TV.

As the stitches started to fade, we talked hair. Yes, you wanted the knots out. Your idea, it seemed, was to have smooth, long beautiful Barbie hair, to wear pink satin dresses and be the most beautiful girl in the world.

You tried to take the knots out yourself. Lying in the bathtub with your great mass of hair floating around your body, you tried to comb your hair right there in the water. You looked like a Polynesian princess, and your hair looked beautiful submerged, like a soft black halo. But out of the water, it dried tight and tangled.

You were highly discouraged. "I wish I was bald," you said, your eyes tearing and your mouth in a pout.

Between bathings and creaming your eyes I read as many "Black hair" magazines as possible. I found a spread on Tashika's Braid Emporium in Brooklyn, that specialized in natural care and management of hair like yours. I phoned and explained the situation to Tashika. "Bring her in," she said.

It was a cold and windy day. We arrived at the storefront deep in the heart of the Black community at 10 am. The gate was still drawn, but the shop was open. You wore jeans and your little girl's purple jacket. The stitches at the inner corners of both eyes gave you a frail and needy appearance.

Tashika, a handsome woman in her 40s with a head full of braids, let us in and examined your hair. She assigned to us Mina, a Grenadian in her early 20s. She was slim, wore jeans and bracelets, with her shoulder length hair finger dried, jelled, and parted on the side.

The great comb out began.

With a jeweler's precision, she separated your hair into sections, breaking the giant knot problem down into smaller and more manageable sections. The tangles in each section were first gently separated by hand to undo as much matting as possible, then combed with a wide-tooth comb, starting at the bottom and working up to avoid pain and breakage. Finally, the untangled hair was twisted and re-pinned to your head to keep it out of harm's way.

It was a huge job.

Look at this," Mina said to me, pointing to a section of especially matted hair. "If you waited a week more, this would have been dreds, and we would have had to cut it out."

This is what you feared the most. You *had* to have long hair. In one foster home, you told me, they cut off all your hair, so what was left formed a little cloud around your head. You felt naked and humiliated.

First, you made fists and drew your mouth into a tight line. Then every time Mina raised the comb you jerked your hair away from her working hands.

"Stop that!" She finally said in her musical Grenadian accent.

"You're hurting me. It hurts!"

"I am being very gentle," she said.

"Ouch!" was your reply.

"Do you want me to do this or not? I can't work when you do that."

But you continued.

"Watch," Mina said to me, sitting at your side. She took the section of hair she had been working on and applying the *back* of the comb, the side with no teeth, and gently touched it to your hair.

"Ouch!" You jerked your head away.

"That hurt?" she asked. You nodded your head.

Mina looked at me, rolling her eyes. "She's acting up. She spoiled."

Spoiled? No, that wasn't it. I knew you hadn't changed your mind about the comb-out. You seemed to be acting out deeper hurts than the pain of a tender scalp.

You were placed in foster care before you were three, and in those five years, moved 16 times. An entry in your case record when you were five read: "Foster mother reports that Serena refuses to leave the house out of fear that she will be placed with another family." What was that like for a tiny child?

During those terrible years you developed these head knots. Did your whirlwind of caretakers not listen to you? Not look you in the eye? Not encourage you or tell you they loved you?

Mina maintained her gentle touch, but you began to scream out in pain. It seemed that each knot held bound tightly within it the suffering of those years. As the combout proceeded, and each tangle was patiently and tenderly unwound, the loneliness, abandonment, searing pain and helplessness was released for you to experience again. I had no other explanation for the depth of hurt you expressed when Mina was clearly so skilled at what she did.

The great combout continued, under your unmistakable protest. The cries of pain changed to rumblings of anger. You howled and twisted your body, eyes narrowed and little mouth set in a sneer.

Were those knots your defiance? Was your refusal to let anyone comb them out your way of keeping yourself whole in the face of so much violation?

You began to scream "No, no, no!" and kicked the chair. I took you aside and explained that it took a long time to make the knots, and it would take a while to comb them out. Did you want to continue?

"Yes," you said, your face free of anger, back to the face of the little girl who wants to look beautiful.

But once back to the task, each untangled knot brought out more intense feelings. The emotional tide continued to swell.

Many times I thought, "Should I stop this?" But how could I take you home looking like that: some sections combed out and nicely twisted, the rest sticking out in a matted mess? And what

would I do then?

Lucky for me, as your will to resist increased, so did Mina's determination. If she was willing to continue, so was I. We joined forces, she yelling louder and more often while I held your head still.

We badgered you, cajoled you and threatened you. We gave you repeated breaks for the sake of all our sanities, feeding you french fries and chocolate ice cream, which you devoured quickly and quietly, like a starving bird.

During these breaks your face would return to that of a tired and hungry child, wanting with all her heart to look beautiful and on our side. When we got back to work it was not you, it was your demons that we battled.

The day wore on. More beauticians arrived. Patrons came and went. We broke for lunch; we broke for dinner. The comb-out continued at a snail's pace, you howling and jerking.

Beauticians and other patrons joined in until the whole hair salon was involved in talking you down, pampering you, letting you watch grown women have their hair braided.

As the day went on, Tashika even produced her own daughter, a few years older than you, to have her hair fixed in dozens of little braids, and thereby be a model of good beauty parlor behavior.

But not you. You continued to fight all our efforts, flailing your arms and legs, thrashing your head from side to side, screaming as if you were being killed.

What did you really think of your own hair? You told me often that your birth mother said you had "bad" hair like your birth father, not "good" hair like her.

And what of your birth mother, whom you occasionally visited, and longed to be with? She died when you were seven. No one told you until months later. No one gave you a chance to say goodbye. No one took you to the funeral.

Anger turned to rage. You kicked the footrest off the chair you sat in, sending it clanging to the floor. I carried you to the waiting section of the beauty parlor, until you calmed down.

Weighing in at just 75 pounds, your strength was enormous. You kicked the bottom out of the chair we were sitting on.

"Only my mother combs my hair," you shouted in a voice dripping with venom.

"I'm right here," I said.

"Not you! My *real* mother."

Your birth mother, she whom you longed for, she who would never, never come to comb out your

knots, never groom you, never hold you to her body, never support you, never comfort you.

You let out a howl of grief and rage. Pumped with adrenalin, you managed to free a hand from my grasp, then used it to bash my head against the wall twice before I could pin it down again.

"I've seen a lot of comb-outs, but I've never seen anything like this," said Tashika, her hands on her hips, shaking her head.

None of us had.

But soon you started to wilt. You had run through the emotional cycle, a cycle I was to see again.

I brought you back to Mina's chair. She and I continued to do battle but we fought your exhaustion, not your pain, rage and grief. It was easier.

Finally we were done. You emerged with thick, healthy, glossy hair, blow-dried straight, reaching halfway down your back. Mina, smiling, demonstrated her tangle-free masterpiece by running her comb through your beautiful mane. It slid through like slicing butter.

Everyone in the shop gazed at you with admiration. "Some women would kill for your thick hair," said Tashika.

Your pouting, screaming, kicking and hitting gave way to a wide smile as you examined the finished product in the mirror, tossing your head this way and that. "I look nice."

Everyone else smiled.

"I look Black!" you exclaimed as if surprised.

Jaws dropped, and glances were exchanged. Hadn't all this been about the tangles in your nappy Black hair?

"Well what do you think you are?" added one customer, her hair half braided, the other half sticking out every which way.

My chest tightened with embarrassment. I wanted to fling up my white hands and shout, "I'm her mother for just three weeks. Don't blame *me* if this kid doesn't have a Black identity." But then I listened again, and heard you this time.

Who were you? How would you know? In all those homes you lived in, there hadn't been one woman whose eyes you could look into and see reflected back your goodness, beautiful skin, shape and form, your growth and development, and everything else that makes up a child's identity.

That would be my job. It was up to me, with bone straight hair and white skin. It was up to me to smile at you with my eyes every day, and let you know as you grew that you were Black and Puerto Rican and that was good, that you were a wonder child with beautiful hair.

The comb-out ended in great triumph. But the cost was great too--ten hours of time, three full tantrums, three broken chairs, a room full of exhausted women.

Meanwhile, after all the unplanned food breaks, I barely had enough money to pay the bill. There was nothing left for the tip. After all Mina had gone through, all I could do was promise to send her money, repeating "Thank you," again and again to her blank stare and tightened jaw.

I do not know what the women of Tashika's, Braid Emporium thought of us, but they certainly were very kind. As for Mina, I sent her a fat tip in the mail, and we came to her often to do your hair.

As we walked out of Tashika's Braid Emporium that first time into the cold winter night you reached up and took my hand, holding it all the way to the subway. You were no longer an exorciser of demons. You were a little girl and proud of how you looked.

As for me, the comb-out brought great revelations. I learned how much work it took to comb Black hair. I learned how much hair could mean.

Most of all, I learned how much pain one little head could hold.

This is the first chapter of a larger piece by Chediac Wilcox. She can be reached at joycecw210@gmail.com