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“I don’t wanna be nigger I wanna be free!” I hear a high-pitched voice chant. A row of blue cotton chairs covered in unrecognizable stains lines this portable classroom. Seated at the second to last seat, the voice continues to chant. Some voices around snicker while other voices say, “that’s so wrong” as they try to hide their smirk. I slowly look up from another row of blue cotton chairs seated across from the high-pitched voice. I want to lock eyes with this voice and stare deep into its soul. I want this voice to regret ever uttering a note. I imagine all the things that I would do once I trace the screeching noise back to the voice, but I stop myself and look back down. As I look down, I continue to write my script for my tenth-grade acting class, but my thoughts are stuck on that high-pitched voice and how deep down, I wished I was the girl behind the voice.

Growing up in San Jose, California, my whole childhood and education experience was surrounded by Hispanic culture. From first to eighth grade, I attended a dual-language school that taught students English and Spanish. From elementary school up until high school, I was one of four other Black students surrounded by predominately Hispanic students. I knew more about Hispanic culture more than I did my own. I grew to resent the color of my skin and the natural curls on my head. I watched as the other girls at my middle school were able to stroke their fingers through their hair or effortlessly brush it in-between classes. They would compare hair lengths and I wanted to be in that circle. I never told my mom about how I envied the other girls

and their pale skin because, at the time, I didn't understand who I was and why I was different. I did, however, tell my mom, "I want long straight hair." So off to the salon, we went.

Twice a month, every other Saturday, at exactly seven-fifteen in the morning, my mom and I went to the hair salon together. Twelve-year-old me would walk into the shop, timid and shy with my natural hair poking out of my itty bitty hood, as the Black stylists and grown Black women seated in high, black, leather chairs, surrounded by different textures of hair watched me walk to my stylist who was posted in the back of the salon. I would try to not make eye contact, but I felt their gaze on me. I immediately thought of every negative thought that I convinced myself they were thinking. When in reality, they were in awe at how much hair I had on my head. I proceeded to my stylist's chair and per usual, I let my mom do all the talking, "she wants her hair long and straight," my mom said.

"Well she already got the 'long' part down," my stylist joked. I didn't get the joke but I was too focused on the mirror in front of me. *I wonder if she thinks I look dirty. Do I smell? Should I have washed my hair before coming? Why it smell so damn greasy in here? I'm boutta be the prettiest girl in this...* "come on now, I know it's early but it ain't that early" my stylist pulls me out of my head. I'm confused, I thought I was getting my hair straightened.

She motions for me to follow her over to a row of black round, porcelain sinks with a black leather chair attached under each one. I pick a seat and she leans the chair back to begin washing my hair. Now I'm even more confused. She's doing the opposite of straightening my hair. I want to say something but what do I know? Her tender hands gently grip my head making sure the water reaches each and every strand of hair on my head. She reaches for the shampoo situated on a shelf above the sink and pumps it into her hand. The smell of fresh soap embraces my nostrils as she creates a lather in her hands. She rubs the suds all around my head and begins

to massage my scalp. Her nails glide in a zigzag pattern, then in an open-and-close motion from the edges near my forehead, to the sides of my ears, down to my neck. I close my eyes and envision myself laying in a field of lilies, wearing a white boho floral dress. I feel my head in the hands that come from a place of love and warmth. She definitely knows what she's doing.

Once my stylist finished washing my hair, she wraps my hair in a towel and walks me back over to her chair. She removes the towel and the warm feeling I had felt as she massaged my head disappears. I stare in the mirror and see a black ball of nappy mess on my head. I almost want to cry, but I don't. I want to close my eyes as she detangles my hair and it grows bigger and messier, but I don't. I simply stare into the mirror with a blank expression, hoping and praying it gets better. She brings out the blow dryer and I crack a very subtle smile. I knew the straightening was finally about to happen.

She grabs a brush and brushes out the curls as she blowdries. Apparently, she finished and walks me over once again to a different black chair with a circular vent attached above it. I am still not satisfied. *Why is my hair still so poofy? I can still see little curls. Why did my mom bring me here?!* I sit in the chair and my stylist lowers the circular vent over my head. She turns a knob on the chair and hot air begins to blast my hair. At this point, I have no idea what's going on or what's to come but I choose to keep my mouth, *or shall I say my thoughts*, shut until she herself tells me that she is done. I can't even hear my own thoughts under this hood.

Twenty minutes later, she lifts the hood and brings me back to her chair... once again. I look over at my mom and she's reading a magazine with fifty different Black faces all with different hairstyles on the cover. Over at my stylists' station, there are two iron combs each with a thick brown handle placed on top of an old raggedy-looking rag. Next to the rag is some kind of machinery that looks like a mini toaster placed on its side. She places the combs in the mini

toaster for a few minutes and begins to comb my hair, piece by piece, strand by strand. *Keeping my thoughts to myself, thoughts to myself.* Once she finishes my head, she whips out a straightener! Finally, this is what I came here for!

She parts my hair into sections. Within each section, she grabs a smaller section. With a fine-toothed comb in one hand and the straightener in the other hand, she begins to straighten my hair. I stare in the mirror and I begin to smile. I don't care to try to hide it. The curls are finally disappearing. *She does know what she's doing after all!* She spins my chair but I try desperately to look in the mirror. I want to see every step and every strand become bone straight. My jet-black hair reached halfway down my back and I loved every inch of it. She gets through the last strand and I am ready to get up and walk to school as if the campus is my runway. I imagined my hair bouncing in the wind, following behind me as I led the way. That fantasy slowly dissipated once I snap back to reality and look in the mirror to see she had "bumped the ends." At that point, I might as well grow a goatee, become a comedian, and go by Katt Williams. But just as I chose not to cry when I saw the ball of nappy mess on my head, I chose not to say anything.

My mom comes over and embraces me, "awww, look at my NayNay! You look so beautiful! Do you like it?"

"Yes," I reply quietly. I was grateful to have been brought to the salon and for my mom to have been able to pay for me, but I was not happy. I was so unhappy that the next day before school, I snuck into my mom's bathroom and straightened out the ends. Now I was happy.

I walked around school flipping my hair, stroking my hair, and receiving compliments on my hair all day long. I was finally "one of them." From sixth to tenth grade, I got my hair straightened almost every other week. However, sitting in my tenth-grade acting class hearing "I

don't wanna be nigger I wanna be free!" and the occasional "it smells like smoke" comments made me realize I am not "one of them." In fact, I no longer envied them or longed to be the girl behind the high-pitched voice. I wanted to know more about my blackness and who I am.

I cut my hair and learned more about protective styles. I learned how to upkeep my hair and wrap it at night. I went through many trials and errors trying out different hair products and figuring out what worked for me. I embraced every trial and every error. I would spend late nights washing, detangling, and playing around with different variations of the LCO (leave-in, conditioner, oil) method. At times, the results would leave a white flaky cast of product over my hair, and other times, the results would produce a shiny, healthy, and defined film over my hair. No matter the result, I would whiff my hair whenever I felt anxious about how my hair looked as I sat in class and the fresh coconut smell reminded me of the tender hands that treated my twelve-year-old head. I would feel loved and warm again. In those moments, I knew that I had to be surrounded by more people that looked like me.

I thank God for placing the only Black teacher at my high school as my advisor. She introduced me to HBCU's and with much hesitation, I applied to Howard University at the last minute. As I complete my final year at Howard, I reflect back on the twelve-year-old me, the sixteen-year-old me, the nineteen-year-old me, and me now. I grew from wishing I was a different race to loving everything about my people. I now appreciate Black hair salons and the long process. I appreciate the greasy smell. I appreciate the glances. I appreciate my voluminous and defined hair. But most of all, I now appreciate who I am.