

## *Cornrows*

I stopped getting cornrows in the third grade.

“Why not?” my mother asked when I firmly pleaded with her not to set a hair appointment, “Your face shines so beautifully with cornrows.” Yet a mother’s words were just that: it was their duty to say you look pretty, dote on you, and give you kisses. It was kids—your own classmates—that always spoke their minds.

“I don’t like it anymore,” I said. I chose to say those few words instead of the truth. Of course, I couldn’t tell her that my classmates said that it’s weird that they can see my scalp so clearly. I couldn’t tell her that they had asked me why the ends of the braids were so stiff. I definitely couldn’t tell her that they said it looked like I had snakes on my head.

I started using relaxers quickly after. The boxes were colorful and vibrant, with playful lettering promising to “loosen curls.” On the front was a smiling Black girl with pin-straight hair plastered front and center. I believed this box would be my savior. I could already see myself joining in with the “hair salon” games on the playground, and I could almost feel how my ponytail would swing behind me as it did for my white classmates. Yet, to my dismay, my hair looked nothing like the smiling girls on the box. No matter how often I begged my mother to apply another box’s worth of product, praying that this time I would receive my desired results, my hair would stay curly—just thinner.

Thus, I kept my hair in long box braids because it was the hairstyle my white classmates liked the most, and I chose never to leave my natural hair out. I would carry my braids for many months until I knew that my next hair appointment was right around the corner, choosing to take out my old braids the night before I got new ones.

I wrapped my identity in those box braids throughout middle and high school, feeling bare and ugly without them. I couldn’t even imagine walking into school without the familiarity of those braids. She shielded me like no other. I sacrificed the health of my hair to feel secure.

It’s been a decade since I first rejected cornrows. Yet, now I welcome the styles that I was first embarrassed by. I now carry locs, and I love them more each day. I’ve sealed away the years of tears spent yearning for the hair of my white counterparts. I’ve corked the envy I once felt toward the little Black girls smiling from those boxes. Or, dare I say, loc’d it.

Some of my identity still remains in my hair—but not in the way it did before. I used to wrap my identity in her so tightly that it smothered the life out of me. Yet now, she lies wildly on my shoulders, allowing me to finally breathe on my own. She’s now a part of me, and I’m no longer a part of her. My hair is my hair, and I love that.

Besides, snakes on my head sounds pretty badass.