

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The first time I seriously considered cutting off all my hair was immediately after I graduated high school. I got tired of spending so much time and money relaxing my hair when it never looked like I wanted it to look for any length of time. I hated thinking about it so much. I had things to do, places to go, people to see, and goals to accomplish, so the idea of getting rid of my hair and its maintenance tempted me. I would occasionally mention this to my parents, but evidently as a light-skinned Black woman I was under some special obligation to have long hair. So, I kept my relaxed hair short, which my dad really disliked. In my early twenties, the urge to cut off my hair grew stronger. I didn't like not being able to spontaneously go swimming or hiking or anything I enjoyed. My hair's interference with my sex life was especially irritating. But no matter how much I wanted to cut my hair off, I was afraid of what my bald head might look like and how people might respond to it. Who would I be without relaxed hair? Could I still be pretty? By the time I reached my mid-twenties, I worked an extremely high-pressure corporate job at an asset management company, assisting with the maintenance and disposition of nearly half a billion dollars' worth of commercial and residential properties across several states. My real estate portfolio was worth nearly twenty million dollars. And, of course, I was the only person of color for miles around. Could I do my job without straight hair?

Asset management paid well, but it wasn't for me. I couldn't justify being so stressed while doing something I hated doing. I resigned from the company after a few years and thought about what to do next. I always wanted to try writing as a full-time profession, but my parents discouraged me from pursuing it. After all, I couldn't be a "starving artist" now, with two children to support. I continued writing as a hobby, and occasionally I was lucky enough to get something published, but I wanted a full-time job where writing played a key role in my work. Thanks in part to the writing credits I did have, I somehow landed a job in the marketing/public relations department at a local community college. The job allowed me to put all my communications skills to work, finding the best ways to present ideas to different audiences, especially with writing. It was a high-pressure job as well, but I loved it. But loving it didn't stop it from being stressful.

In addition to work, I was raising my daughter Jasmine and my son Noah on my own. I was making my way out of a very traumatic relationship with Noah's father involving domestic violence. I left the house he and I shared and moved back in with my parents. Then my hair started falling out. Big clumps would remain in the sink after I washed my hair, and even bigger clumps would stay behind in the comb

when I combed my hair. This new development helped me finally decide to do away with my hair and put myself out of my misery. I went to the barber shop closest to my house early one Saturday morning, so I could be the first one in the chair when it opened. I got one of the barbers to give me a short fade. When I left the shop, I bought several new pairs of earrings.

The air circulating around my head once my hair was cut was a great sensation. I could feel layers of negative energy leaving my body. I was confident in a way I never experienced before. My boss and co-workers reacted with a bit of shock, but they got used to it. I became more talkative and shared more feedback during staff and team meetings post-haircut, and my boss appreciated the boost of assertiveness. My kids thought the haircut was strange – Jasmine didn't like me having hair "like a man," and Noah rubbed my head and laughed hysterically the first time he saw my haircut, saying, "your head is so big and round mom, like the moon!" I dealt with all the responses to my hair (or the lack thereof) with humor and grace. What was not humorous was how my parents responded to my shorn locks. They didn't like my super short cut, and they were quite blunt about how horrible it made me look. My mom also wondered aloud if my frustration with my son's father made me "go over to the other side." She worried a great deal about my potential lesbianism, saying "don't give up on all of them because of a few bad apples."

It was just as well my hair was so short, because the stress in my life continued to increase. My son Noah was autistic, and his autism was manifesting itself in extremely problematic behavior in school. My son would throw desks and chairs and hit other students, and rarely stayed in his seat in class. Hardly a day went by without a call from his principal, and at least twice a week I was leaving my office to go to the school to deal with some crisis. On top of this, I was still in the process of moving back into my parents' house with my two children as my relationship ended. My work performance began to suffer, and my supervisors were not sympathetic or accommodating. I knew I was nearing my breaking point and something would have to give. I would have to seriously consider leaving the nine-to-five world, at least for a while. There was no way I could be fully present at a job. But how would this work? How I would support my family? How would I get enough money to move back out of my parents' house into my own place? I thought about all my skills, talents and abilities, and all the people I knew. How I could I (legally) make money without a traditional job? After a good deal of thought, I figured maybe I could pick up some freelance writing work. I had some media contacts thanks to my public relations job. Could they help put me in touch with editors and writing opportunities? Could I be a professional writer? Maybe this was my chance to find out.

I left my job and began writing. I managed to catch some breaks, including an opportunity to write for Baltimore's alternative weekly newspaper from time to time, which opened lots of doors for me as a writer. Between freelance writing and introducing some strategically placed government assistance into my world, I managed to create a reasonably stable existence for my family once we got settled in my parents' home. Most importantly, my time was entirely my own. I made my own schedule. I made time to get my son to the services he needed, and to raise my daughter in a more hands-on way. I even homeschooled her for a bit of time. My mom watched my kids whenever I needed, and I spent my nights writing. Money still tended to be scarce, so I couldn't afford salon visits. Eventually I stopped going to the barbershop and started letting my hair grow back out, but I didn't go back to relaxing my hair. My dad didn't understand how I was surviving without a job, and he especially didn't understand what was going on with my hair. But as always, my dad had a plan for my hair. My dad started offering me money to get my hair relaxed. He also decided the best way to get me to agree to relaxing my hair was to have my mother do the offering. He and I hadn't been on great terms since he traumatized my daughter with his comments about her hair a while back, and while there was no problem with me and my kids moving back home when my domestic situation became an abusive one, my dad and I were still distant. I suppose he thought my mom might be able to create a path of less resistance.

It started off casually, so casually in fact I didn't even notice what I was being set up for at first. One day my mom said to me, "Tula, I know you are kind of in a hard place right now with money. How about I treat you to a day at the salon, let you get your hair done?" I responded with, "I appreciate the offer mom, but I'm good. Why don't you treat yourself to something?" I genuinely thought it was just a kind gesture on her part. She made the same offer to me a few weeks later. A month or so later she offered to give me money to get my hair done along with a few dollars for my pocket. "Look, I know you'd love to get your hair fixed properly," she said. "It might cheer you up. In fact, I know it would. Tell you what. How about I give you money to get your hair done and fifty dollars for yourself?" Then I knew the fix was in. I didn't even bother to get angry at her. I just added it to the list of disappointments I kept in my head when it came to my mom. I shook my head no, told her it wasn't necessary, and went on my way. My refusal made my dad even more determined to somehow force me to get my hair relaxed. The next time I was offered one hundred dollars in addition to the costs of relaxing my hair. I was totally broke, which made turning the money down even more difficult. I was struggling to keep my car insured and out of the repo man's hands, but I said no. The next time the offer was one hundred fifty dollars. Then two hundred dollars. I needed the money. I wanted the

money. But I refused to take the money. They knew I needed it but wouldn't let me have it unless I straightened my hair.

In time the offers stopped coming from my mother and started coming directly from my dad. The dollar amounts increased too, but now I dealt with the "bad cop" approach he used instead of the "good cop" touch my mother applied. He said, "You know you need this money," and "Stop being so stubborn," and "I don't understand what is wrong with you." When he offered five hundred dollars and I turned it down, his frustration exploded. "Petula, I don't know what is wrong with you. You aren't an ugly girl at all. Why would someone as pretty and light-skinned as you want to go around with a knotty head? It doesn't look right! Your hair is supposed to be straight." I didn't even bother to acknowledge the comment. I just walked away.

The last time he offered me money, there was no conversation. As I came home one day, my dad was sitting on the porch. I nodded curtly and mumbled a greeting as I went into the house. I found it fanned across the dining room table in a big wide arc. Twenty-dollar bills. One thousand dollars, arranged in a semi-circle around a Dark and Lovely relaxer kit. The bills were all crisp and brand new, fanned atop a white lace doily. I sat down at the table to count the money. I left an hour later, after carefully re-arranging the bills back on top of the doily around the relaxer box. I left a note saying, "Not For Sale." Later I washed my hair, twisted it up, went to bed, and fluffed my hair out into a big beautiful Afro the following morning. It looked great. I felt great.

My car got repossessed that afternoon.