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Braided to My Roots by Mariam H. Keita

I grew up with my head in between the hands of strong women. My Gambian mother always reminded me to refer to them as “auntie” out of respect. These wise sages divined the thick, unruly mass of kinky-curly 4c hair that has tumbled from my scalp since my worldly debut. The feeling of warm hands on either side of my face and the gentle, yet firm maneuvering of my neck are memories so deeply ingrained that even now, they usher in feelings of safety.

Back in Akron, Ohio, where I was born, hair salons were my second home. Just a whiff of Blue Magic and freshly pressed hair will still send me back to long afternoons playing Uno with my cousins in my Auntie Macie’s hair salon. To my four-year-old self, she was magical: her intelligent fingers could transform anyone’s hair into a breathtaking crown atop their head in just a few hours. A true *hairy* godmother. In her salon, I became royalty by association: a princess, watching the queen transform her subjects.

Occasionally, I was the focus of her spells. Some of my earliest memories include my hair being tugged by relentless hands as I squirmed. I take the adage “beauty is pain” from my mother, who would often repeat it on such occasions. While I may have hated the process (with the fiery passion of a thousand flatirons on full heat) of getting my hair done, I was almost always in love with the end result. After hours of tears and boredom, would come the moment when I was released to behold the finished product. Whether I was adorned with colorful plastic beads or meticulous twists, I would stand marveling for long moments in front of the mirror, mesmerized by the intricate art that my scalp carried. The medium: my hair.

When I moved to Iowa after preschool, I left behind the strong women that had reared me and their insurmountable love. Even though I was too young to understand it, I had suffered an extreme loss. My father was perplexed by my disobedient curls, and my stepmother had never had to deal with such rowdy locs. In Iowa, separated from the village that had raised me, I was no longer a princess on her court.

While my parents tried their best to make me feel at home with them, I had become a foreigner in unfamiliar land. Many mornings passed with my father as he tried to manage my hair in a way that wouldn’t leave me in a fit, tearily insisting that I was simply too ugly to go to school that day. My stepmother tried to tame my hair by making it more like her silky blonde strands, trying relaxers that she found at the drugstore. Occasionally, she gave up and took me to a hair salon, where, with my head in between the hands of strong women I did not know, I was treated to a taste of home.

I was around nine when I first met Dina Kimble, the wife of my father’s good friend. Long weekends were spent sitting between her knees as she gifted me hot-oil treatments, leave-ins, and silk scarves. The Kimbles provided me with a much-needed home away from home: the kids filled the space of the cousins I had left behind, their living room floor replaced the hard salon chairs of my younger days. Their gentle, yet firm guidance was crucial.

My parents had plenty of love for me, but without the influence of the communities that I’ve grown up in, which have played such a large part in shaping my identity as a Black woman, a Gambian-American, a confident and capable human being, my life would not be as rich and colorful as it is today.