

The Big Chop

By Tomi Madarikan

“You are beautiful.” He definitely flirts with everyone that sits in his chair. “Thank you,” I heard myself giggle...Gross. I snatched my gaze in discomfort, and scanned the hair salon for a more comfortable target to land it on. I made the brave choice to settle for myself in the mirror in front of me. For a moment, I was distracted by the hair dust from my big chop in progress. It speckled my face like little black freckles...I always thought those were so cute. For a second I got lost in thoughts of freckles and beauty marks and why certain blemishes get to be cute at the expense of the ingrown hair scars on my jawline. I met Adrian’s gaze just as my little daydream ended. An unexpected seriousness had taken over his face and he turned his eyes to meet mine in the mirror. He reaffirmed, “you are beautiful. I need you to truly believe that.”

I hate to say that a man made me realise how uncertain of my beauty I’d become. I’m supposed to be a better feminist than that. I usually do believe I’m beautiful. I had grown up having that drummed into me all the time by my own people in my own home and my own country. But when I left Nigeria for college in the US, I learnt that I was Black, and dark skinned...and after I put on that freshman fifteen, I was a little thicker than ‘slim thick’ too. I wonder who decides where ‘slim thick’ ends and ‘thick’ begins? I wonder if fatphobia will ever be treated with the same disdain as other isms? For yet another second, I got lost in thoughts of isms and phobias and why certain bodies are treated with more value than others. Sigh...my mind can be like quick sand. I was jolted back to reality when Adrian presented my face with a palmful of my hair. He must have noticed my attempts at dissociation because he placed it right between my eyes. He wanted to shake me up. “Oooo this is real now,” he crooned. I gasped and he followed up coolly “you wanna keep it?”

I looked up at him in the mirror with clear confusion. “Do you wanna keep some of your hair?” he clarified. “A lot of people do it. It’s like a...souvenir.” I nodded hesitantly, and he folded the hair into my palm with a look of pride like he was my dad and I had just won the junior spelling bee. I didn’t feel proud at that moment. I had held so tightly to my hair for most of my life and yet it had just given into Adrian’s razor without even putting up a fight. I wish it had been this compliant with the combs on all of those Sunday nights I spent between my mum’s legs getting *shuku*¹, and/or *kolese*². For most of my childhood, my hair was my only rebellious quality. I followed rules, but my hair did not. I stayed in line, but my hair kinked and curled and blurred every parting I placed in it. When I wanted her to be long, she shrunk. When I begged her to lay flat, she stood erect. For the longest time, we were at odds. And now here we are, and...she just listens?

¹ Shuku: translates to ‘basket’ in Yoruba. It is a hairstyle traditionally worn by the Yoruba people that involves braiding a high ponytail/bun atop the head that resembles a basket. It was traditionally worn by wives of royalty but has since become worn by women of all walks of life.

² Kolese: translates to legless (without legs) in Yoruba. It is a hairstyle that involves braiding cornrows that run from the front to the base of the head.

I looked around the salon trying to work out who was a regular customer and who else might have been visiting for the first time. Everybody else seemed calm and trusting so I figured I was the only newbie. Things moved quickly because by the time I found my face in the mirror again, I had what looked like an uneven TWA³. I felt a twinge of sadness creep in. It must have shown on my face because Adrian practically leapt to persuade me that the cut was just a work in progress, and that I would love it once it took more shape. He thought I was mourning my length, or even a part of my identity. The truth is that looking down at the thick tuft of hair now in my palm, I realised that my hair was never a part of my identity in the way that it should have been. My hair had only ‘rebelled’ so much because I never committed to understanding it. After all, that *is* why kids rebel, right? I got my first perm when I was 6 years old because even as early as then, I believed that my hair was a problem to be solved. I continued perming my hair for the next ten years, until I got a bad perm and *had* to stop. Even after that, when I went ‘natural’, I just braided my hair away. I didn’t even bother trying a ‘wash and go’. I figured that was only for the 3A-4A⁴ girlies. A 4C⁵-girl like me could never. I never really looked at my hair with ‘possibility’. I always looked at it with fear and mistrust, and shame. Damn! Who needs a therapist when you have a quicksand mind like mine?

“You look *damn* good,” Adrian chuckled. He was a cheeky one. I couldn’t help but smile, even if only to indulge him. Plus, he was right. I could barely recognise myself with my new haircut. My hair was about an inch long on each side of my head, and about two inches high in the centre. It really lengthened my face and showed off my almond eyes. I looked edgy, confident, and *handsome*. My cheekbones cut sharp as a razor. I had feared that cutting my hair would make me look less feminine somehow, or that I wasn’t bad-ass enough to pull it off but I had been so wrong. In that mirror, I felt like I saw myself for the first time in years. I saw the little, precocious girl I once was; a little girl full of passion and curiosity and the audacity to believe in the world...a little girl whose spirit had not yet been dimmed by patriarchy, misogyny, racism and being ‘left on read’⁶ a few too many times. At the same time, I finally saw the young woman I’d been growing into; a woman brave enough and bold enough and carefree enough and aware enough to take risks and chances and do hard things and win. Adrian was right. I *did* look damn good, and he looked damn proud of himself. Like a magician, he whipped the barber’s cape off of me in one swift, graceful movement. He extended a hand to walk me over to the sinks for my first, post-chop hair wash. That walk felt like a waltz. With so much weight cut off of my shoulders, I could float. I could glide. There was no going back to walking ever again.

³ TWA: teeny weeny afro; a term used colloquially within the natural hair community to denote a short afro

⁴ 3A-4B: refers to hair types where the numbers denote the overall hair type and the letters refer to more granular characteristics such as density, porosity and curl pattern etc. 3A denotes a curly hair type with big loose spiral curls. 4A denotes a tightly curled hair type with S-curly.

⁵ 4C: Widely known as the most tightly curled hair type; curls that are mostly Z-patterned, tightly kinked and less defined

⁶ Left on read: when a recipient has read, but not responded to, a sender's text message(s)

When the water hit my skin, every inch of my scalp sang. It was a chorus like I'd never heard. It was a sound bath that purified my whole mind for the longest second. I had never experienced water that intimately on my head. It was a warm hug that radiated from my temples to my toes. Water can be such a devastating, scary force, and yet it can be so freeing when you just surrender to it. How often does a Black woman get to surrender by choice and feel safe? I didn't even notice when my eyes started producing water of their own. Everything flushed out of me. Every clenched jaw and furrowed brow and raised shoulder and tight chest just gave way. The tears rolled down hot and desperate. It was like my body knew that a new chapter was imminent, and it needed to purge itself of old energy and trauma and pain. Adrian wrapped a towel around my shoulders and brought me some tissues. As if nothing had happened, we glided back to the chair. I resisted the strong urge to apologise for the intensity of my emotions at the sinks. I did not feel sorry for freeing my mind and heart of the burdens I'd carried for so many years, so it felt disingenuous to allege that I did. He dried my hair off, moisturised it and styled it with a curling sponge. He perfected my line-up and took pictures of me to document this momentous occasion. He was a pro.

"That cut looks good sis," said one of the other barbers as he brushed past me to sweep up some of my hair. His voice pulled me out of the little world I'd created in my head with Adrian, and back down to earth. Suddenly I realised just how many new customers had come into the salon in the past hour since I'd been there. Every one of them seemed fully at ease in their chair, like this was their second home. They *knew* that they would leave satisfied. "That cut *does* look good baby," buttressed an older Black woman with a gorgeous snow white pixie cut sitting a few chairs over from me. She seemed so effervescent and comfortable in her skin. Her joy and ease were infectious. I was surprised that I didn't notice her presence before then. She swung around in her chair to face me, exposing a super cool zig zag undercut right above the nape of her neck. "I'm always telling my daughter to come here with me and get all that perm cut off. You're about to save a whole lot of money and time girl. You might *never* want to go back to all them braids and weaves and sew-ins," she chuckled and shook her head. Her voice trailed off as the whirl of a blowdryer took over the space. I smiled softly to myself and turned back to face myself in the mirror.

Her words got me thinking. What would life be like if I just never grew my hair out again? Could I be as cool as she was? Would people treat me differently? Would *I* treat me differently? Would I be treated differently at work? It's hard enough being the only Black person on the team. Would this just make things harder? I felt great about my new look in the hair salon but would that change if someone told me that they didn't like it? What if my boyfriend didn't like it? I mean I don't *need* his approval technically, but I would *want* him to find it -and me- attractive. What if I woke up the next day and deeply regretted cutting all my hair off? A knot suddenly took over my stomach. I had blocked out the thought until now but, what would my mum think?! What if she hates it? Am I old enough for that to not matter? Will I *ever* be old enough for that to not matter?

...These thoughts felt dangerously like walking. My new-found glide was beginning to feel awfully short-lived.

Adrian saved me from my anxious spiralling once again when he placed his hands on my shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze. "It is just hair. It can always grow back." He must have seen it all because he was a true mind reader. That was exactly what I needed to hear. I let out an exasperated sigh and laughed. "I had a lot of fear coming in here today". He leaned forward to drop a small comb on the table in front of me. "But you conquered it. You could have turned around at the door. You could've called to cancel your appointment. You didn't. You stayed and you trusted me to show you a different version of yourself. You should be proud." I smiled and exhaled. My glide was back, and this time, it was here to stay. I asked Adrian a few questions about maintenance, when to come back for a trim, and what products to use. I asked him if I could wash my hair everyday and I was ecstatic when he told me that it was recommended. Cheers to more water intimacy and scalp song in my future.

Adrian swung another chair over and perched next to me. "So, how do you feel?", he whispered softly. I turned to face him squarely. In the short span of an hour, he and I had been on a rollercoaster together. I had come into his shop timid, anxious, and dull. I would be leaving him brazen, self-assured, feeling ten pounds lighter. There was a chance that I would never see this man again, and yet he had changed my life forever. It may seem like an exaggeration, but I had just experienced that I could take off my 'crowning glory' and still feel like royalty. I had just learnt that I could test, bend and reject society's beauty standards and come out on the other side feeling more beautiful than ever. I felt invincible. I had been looking at myself in the mirror so much, but it was only then that I saw my full face and my full self reflected back to me. My response ejected from the deepest parts of me; "I feel like I'm no longer going to hide behind anything or anyone. I feel like I will never seek permission to live in my fullness ever again."

Adrian held his breath for a second, and then exhaled and chuckled. "I thought you were just going to tell me you liked the cut. I did not expect all that." We laughed together and I headed to the front desk to check out. Adrian helped me into my favourite sage green trench on my way out and I thanked him profusely. I floated my way out of the door and down the tight stairs out into the crisp November air. The snow planted little, wet kisses on the peaks of my ears and the nape of my neck. I felt alive. The sidewalk felt bigger. White people moved out of my way - instead of expecting me to move out of theirs. There is space for me in the world. I could finally feel it, and I now had the guts to create more of it. Before I knew it, I had arrived at the Myrtle Ave subway station. The M train that would take me back to midtown was a minute away. I pulled out my iphone and hastily opened up the notes app. Just in time, I jotted "I will never seek permission to live in my fullness ever again".

