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**CurlzMT**

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EVELYN HARPER

# CurlzMT

I wring out my curls as the water drips out onto my bathroom floor. I hear the water trickling as I push my hair one way or another, trying to find the natural parting. My hair has a mind of its own. My arms start to ache from reaching and pulling at the ringlets, telling them to calm down and just go my way. These ringlets have grown two years of age, which is how long it's been since I last got a haircut. My ringlets are much younger than my actual age of twenty-one. I investigate the ends and see all the splits. Where did those come from? I blow hot air on them to chastise their misbehaving. Sometimes I pause my nagging out of frustration. Maybe I'll give my curls a timeout for a bit and let them free.

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“Ouch!” I guess I deserve that if I can't keep my head still. She uses all her force to brush out my curls that knotted in the past thirty minutes between my shower and now. While disobeying my mother's requests to keep my head up, I see a mound of broken curls on the ground. Then I realize that I mistook one mound for many mounds. Emphasis on the “s.” My hair twins me: we both are eight years old and never been cut. The unruliness has never truly been tamed. Even my mother can't domesticate my ringlets with all her fussing. We spend hours together doing my hair. Hours. We spend most evenings unangling, defusing, and then braiding in some sort of fashion. My mom would tell me every time that I've got strong, thick hair— strong from my father, thick from my mother. I've had this done so many times that I can truly sleep sitting up with my upper half staying in perfect posture.

My lifestyle does not differ from the lives of most girls in my neighborhood. All my friends do the same thing. At least they used to. Now all the older girls are fussin' over straight hair. I live in a one-mile radius of about ten or eleven different black hair salons. The salons have to be black or you'll never get your hair back is what I'm told. I wonder when it'll be my turn to go to a salon. I do like my own hair, though not many people like me like their natural hair. I stay natural while everyone goes to get a relaxer. Chemical relaxers transform the nappiest of heads into Ms. Barbie Rapunzel. Even though a relaxer relaxes your curls, I think women get a relaxer to relax their nerves. It's less stressful than having to sit through this half day adventure of nappy hair. My mom's curls have been relaxed before. My sister's curls have been relaxed before. My rite of passage begins with the salon, right?

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I wish I had straight hair like all the white girls. At least that's what I'm supposed to wish. This thought enters my mind often while I sit under the dryer. Under the dryer you think a lot of thoughts, but this thought comes back most often. I drift in and out of consciousness under the relaxing heat and Snuggie-like plastic cover I wear. I like the dryer. It's the most peaceful part of the process of getting my hair done in this large, four-walled, burnt-smelling salon only a mile away from my home. I'm finally old enough to stay at the salon alone. Being thirteen has a lot of perks. iTunes account. Facebook access. But this one might be the most significant change in my life, other than puberty. I finally look like the other girls, and I get to be with them too. This place is the hub for black women around here. We come to the salon, chat, sleep, eat, leave the salon six hours later only to return after three weeks for a wash, which is a simple shampoo and straighten. Sadly, the pattern repeats three weeks after for a retouch on your relaxer. Sixty dollars plus tip every six weeks. Thirty dollars plus tip for a wash every other three weeks. My parent's wallet starts smelling like my curls do after the salon: burnt.

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The music flows as someone in the motorcycle next to the car screams, "Afro-TASTIC" and drives away. Vacation doesn't mean vacation from looks. My curls get a lot of attention: wanted or not. I've done a lot to them, and I'm surprised they still come out as bouncy as they did when I was a child. My afro actually flows in the wind these days. Okay, it took a convertible with the top down driving at top speed down the highway in L.A., but still—it flows. When I get out of the car, fellow beach-goers say "Hey, nice hair" or "Cool look." I smile and say "Thanks" if I catch on fast enough. I'm usually so caught off guard that I don't notice until it's too late. Being twenty-one makes me unaware that people see me. I thought I would just disappear after puberty set in. I find a good spot on my beach towel and I let the sand gently graze my hair. I'll probably find some grains of sand hiding in my hair for the rest of the week. The sun rays warm my face just as my thoughts warm my heart. Accepting my hair hasn't been so bad. That's new.

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"Ouch!" This feels oddly familiar. The hairdresser pulls on my hair to get the new knots that sprung up on the thirty-minute car ride here, to the salon. My scalp has burned quite strongly from this pink goo, otherwise known as chemical relaxer, for much longer than my hairdresser told me it would. Fourteen years of age and tired of the pain. For the amount of money we pay, you would think I wouldn't have to spend eight hours in this vacuum of socioeconomic stagnancy and pay two dollars for Hot Cheetos. Right up until the moment my hairdresser straightens the last piece hair, I couldn't be more excited to get out of that swivel chair. I look in the mirror and see someone that I didn't want to be. My excitement is just about as flat as the baby hairs on the back of my head.

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"Hey!" I say as I turn around in my chair to confront the person touching my braids again. I love my twisty braids, but they're mine. Not his. You would think now that we were in third grade everyone would have matured by now. Didn't the teacher say, "Keep your hands to yourself"? The perpetrator just smiles in ignorance and mumbles something about how he's just always wanted to see if my braids really bounce. And then he goes back to his seat. I mean, they do. I play with my braids all the time and they

always bounce back. Even so, I'm uncomfortable that he touched me. That I'm touchable. But I just turn around and go back to fiddling with my school supplies.

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"Just so you know, I like your hair!" says a voice quickly moving past me. By the time I've looked up from my book, they've already gone, probably either out of embarrassment or lack of time. What a life of a twenty-one-year old college student. I realize I've been playing with my long strands of hair out of concentration on my book. I wonder how my curls feel. They probably love the attention they get from all the random people that give compliments them, stare at them, even touch them. People touch my curls while acting brave and ignorant. "I hope my curls are happy!" passes through my head while I sigh as I pack up my stuff and get up to go my next class.

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"Hey!" I say as I quickly turn around. Someone touched my afro again. I do admit it's big and tempting to touch. But you would think now that we were in high school everyone would have matured by now. A busy passing period down a very small staircase doesn't really allow for long reactions. I can't find the perpetrator this time. They still think I'm touchable. I know we are eighteen, but isn't there still a rule about keeping your hands to yourself?

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"You look better with long hair! Don't cut it." The redhead girl leans over her desk and tells me. We have some extra time in class before the last bell of the day releases us. I look around at my eighth-grade history class. All these kids were getting bussed to go here. They were the only white people at this school, and the only white people to ever tell me what to do with my hair. That girl doesn't know how expensive it is. She doesn't know how sad I feel when I leave the salon and realize my hair will never look like her hair. She doesn't get it.

I feel like I'm in that scene from "Good Hair" with Chris Rock: "If your hair's relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they're not happy." I didn't want her hair, anyway. It's a bright red mane full of ringlets that she always pulls up in a bun. Nor did I want my neighboring classmate's hair, who puts some weird liquid on it to make it look wet all the time. It looks like it's Halloween for her every day, and her costume resembles a school mop. My curls will never look like that. I would never ever ask for them to look like that, either. Of course, I didn't say that and the bell rings anyway, abruptly finishing our conversation for me.

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"Dad, I want to cut it." Tears are running down my face while I'm holding my phone to my ear. I had spent a long time sitting on these steps outside of my new high school. Every time I look in my high school's windows, mirrors, and bathrooms, I see someone I don't know. I see someone I don't like. I thought my rough, battered, straight hair didn't belong. I thought this would be the look that would make me feel pretty. I've had a long time to contemplate this. My mother was almost an hour late picking me up from freshman orientation. Being fourteen years old doesn't allow for very much independent decision making, but here I am, alone on the sad, gray high school steps making my own choices. My Dad is surprisingly overjoyed to hear my words as we talk on the phone.

“And my wallet will be happy too!” my Dad chimed in as we talk through the details. I’ve been watching a lot of videos of black women chopping all their relaxed hair off. Turns out, more people are fed up than just me. I can’t say this is impromptu. I’ve been thinking about it ever since that redhead girl told me not to.

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“Hello, new little hairs,” I think to my little fresh buzz on my head. My head feels so free. I look around and say goodbye to some of my greatest loved ones— my fallen mounds of hair resting around the salon chair. I’ve raised them. Abused them with horrible chemicals. And now I have outlived them. “I look better with short hair,” I say to my hairdresser, while rubbing my newly shaven head gleaming from an oily scalp and nervous sweat from the long wait. As I look in the mirror, I see an old, familiar face, even though fourteen years never felt so young. I saw me.

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As I finish trying to tame my unruly curls for the day, I pull them and check their length. Pretty long. They bounce back into perfect form just as if I never touched them. I tease them and they stand up as proud and tall as ever. They do their own thing, these curls. I put away my comb and look in the mirror. I smile as I think to my curls, “You are free now.”

*EVELYN* is sophomore from Indianapolis, IN, and she’s an advertising major with a minor in music. Evelyn is interested in celebrity branding and supporting black content creators and likes filling up her Google calendar until there is not whitespace. In a few years, you can find her to working as a copywriter in an advertising agency and eating Cheetos when she gets too stressed.

