

Rebekah Blackwell-Taylor

I saw Bekah a few days ago for the first time in over a year. Walking towards her, the sun beamed on her face; her curls seemed to sparkle. We couldn't help but smile, both of us recognizing that after all that time, two different but equally beautiful people stood before one another. Each of us another version of ourselves, like butterflies floating in front of each other.

"Your hair looks so good!" We both exclaimed simultaneously, followed by a long hug.

I think back to our first year of college, when our hair reflected our stress. Even while she was struggling to embrace herself, it was impossible for Bekah's energy not to fill up every corner of the room she entered.

Bekah had just begun to embrace her natural hair that year. She tells me I was one of the first people to compliment her curls. Ironical, in retrospect, since I hated my own. It seems that our paths crossed for a reason. As I was deciding each day between the curl cream and the straightener, here was someone showing me the absolute freedom of loving her hair. Or so I thought. In reality, just a few doors down the dorm hallway, Bekah spent many nights in tears. While I saw luscious 4a curls and bounce, Bekah was struggling to see this beauty herself. Surrounded by long strands of smooth silky hair, she did not know where she and her curly hair belonged.

As a child, Bekah remembers the comments people made about her coiled hair. Though they seemed small, these remarks lived in her, battling her self worth. As a Black woman, Bekah faced even harder challenges with her hair growing up. In a time where she needed it most,

support for her hair was scarce. Nobody could understand the richness that lay within each coil of her hair leaving her to believe it meant nothing, even when it truly meant everything. The last night before the school year started was always a monumental time. While all the other kids eagerly gathered their supplies, nine-year old Bekah calculated how early she had to wake up to straighten her hair. She liked it better that way, or perhaps the kids at school who constantly told her she looked ‘weird’ just made her believe that.

The judgement over her curly hair followed Bekah into high school. She put in more long mornings trying to smooth down her hair as it crept up. She would stare into the mirror above her bathroom sink. Maybe it was just the haze of her tired eyes, but it seemed like every piece of herself that she rejected was magnified. Her curly afro sprung at the top of her 5’10 curved body. Bekah hated this. She reduced herself to the physical reflection staring back at her, even though she was so much more. She yearned to shrink herself into a smaller body, though she knew this was unrealistic. So, she tried to fix the one thing she could control—her hair. Her curls stretched long as the straightener drew each spiral down with force. Length was Bekah’s ultimate goal. It made her feel more feminine, compensating for her hatred towards what she felt were the more rugged parts of her body.

When she walked through the school hallways, she was showered with compliments about her long straight hair. She knew she wouldn’t have heard the same kinds of compliments about her natural hair, including words like “beautiful” and “elegant,” , but “they just didn’t understand curly hair,” she tells me now. When she was alone these compliments seemed barbed with

malice, shaping her image of herself. She came to believe that her ‘unpolished’ self was not good enough.

Bekah wished this admiration could last. Straight hair seemed more ladylike and delicate, and she saw how differently it made people treat her. Her curls were distinct, an unfamiliarity that others could not handle, let alone appreciate. At the time, she thought less about her own feelings and more about the comfort of those around her. Straightening her hair deflected the uncomfortable feelings, the unrealistic expectations, and the internalized ideals they had with a soft veil.

So she decided to make that straight hair a lasting feature and headed to the hairdresser for a relaxer. The hair salon looked like a crime scene as she sat on the black leather chair. Two hands doused her strands in a toxic cream as it brought an end to each curl one by one. Bekah did not mind seeing them go, and concentrated on the thought of how elegant she would look with her long velvet hair.

“Oops” the hairdresser muttered.

Bekah snapped out of her daze and focused her view on the thick cream being wiped off her ear. She thought nothing of it as she fell back into her trance.

The next day Bekah woke up surrounded by her straight hair, each strand lay smooth along her shoulders. She admired this new woman in the mirror as she swept a strand away from her face.

Her eyes widened at the sight of a thick scab sitting along the top of her ear. For a moment, she felt a flood of fear. She realized her initial feeling of lightness was really a result of all the richness that had been stripped from her hair. She was an accomplice to this crime, giving her hairdresser the weapon and the means to wound her hair and her identity with it.

By the end of junior year, Bekah's relaxer had grown out to the bottom of her hair. She felt like two people. Her curls always grew back from her roots with strength, though they were weighed down by the singed ends. Bekah clung onto these ends so tightly. Length was vital no matter what state they were in. It wasn't until Bekah started to see the women around her begin to embrace their short, flourishing curls that she began the journey of loving her own. She started the summer cutting off all the damage from the chemicals. With her dead ends discarded, her curls sprung up with life like blooming flowers. But this was just the beginning.

For Bekah, entering college was like entering a house of mirrors. Her own reflection became a source of discomfort. Her image seemed unfamiliar, and she could not find where her true self began or where it ended. Still, she walked out each day radiant, embracing the thick curls that arose from the top of her head like a custom crown.

"When I wore my afro, people stared," she told me. She felt exposed and anxious that her most natural self was too overbearing. Despite such a salient feeling, she walked with courage. She possessed the strength to welcome such vulnerability until it became her superpower.

“The commitment was the hardest part of making the change, you have to keep telling yourself that you look fine,” she explained. She found it hard to admire her hair on some days. These were the times when she had to remind herself that one bad hair day was not an excuse to pull out the straightener. Instead, she began experimenting with different styles. She traced each strand with her fingers smoothing them down with gels or gathered her curls at the top of her head. Through this, she learned about the versatility and potential of both herself and her hair.

Over time, Bekah began to appreciate people’s stares. She is the person who smiles wide as you walk by and lures you in with her welcoming heart. Her hair has become part of what makes her distinguishable and authentic. She no longer fears standing out.

Today, what encourages Bekah is the desire to keep her hair healthy. She is driven by the fullness she feels seeing her hair grow and gain strength. Her hair has followed her throughout every stage of her healing and has become a representation of her overall well being. She has found the value of taking an extra moment to care for every inch of herself. “I am still trying to figure it out,” she tells me. She sees her hair as art, an alluring masterpiece. She patiently works on it, adding a little more detail and care each day.

Bekah is admirable not only for her confidence to wear her natural hair, after years of neglecting such a large part of herself, but also for understanding that the feeling of being a stranger to yourself is “not just something that goes away with you looking better,” she tells me. There are some days Bekah looks in the mirror and can still feel disappointment. Yet she reminds herself that this is not her. The feelings of lack and doubt do not define who she is nor are they her own

thoughts. They are the thoughts of years and years of eurocentric beauty ideals, the standards of those who cannot even begin to understand the beauty, history, and depth of her hair. Each day she chooses to leave her hair natural, to feel closer to who she truly is.