

Chris Villa

In our last year of highschool, I shoved Chris's head under the faucet of my bathroom sink as I watched his curls take shape under the cast of thick gel. Though he never said it, he loathed me for throwing his pomade in the trash and swapping it for my shea moisture curling cream. There was so much irony in that moment now that I think back. He sat on top of the toilet patiently, eye level with my straight dead ends as I twisted his curls around my fingers. Chris never said anything though, because he is too nice for that. I might as well have been yelling "you should really love your curls more" while I sat in the fume-filled bathroom crushing mine down with the straightener.

When Chris was younger he always rocked a buzz cut. When his hair would start to grow in, nobody knew what to do with it except cut it off. He spent most of his days on his skateboard, as he does now, idolizing skaters with similar body types and fashion that he wanted to capture himself. Yet, what was different was always the hair. Chris envied their silky waves that blew back gracefully as they drifted over the pavement. So, he began experimenting. Every so often his mom would leave a straightener lying around. Chris would plug it in, run his curls between the metal plates, and watch as the thick smoke rose up in the bathroom mirror.

During early highschool, hats were Chris's best friends and his curls' worst enemy. After a while, he had a perfect nightly routine to ensure his curls were as flat as could be. Going straight out of the shower, he would head for the blow dryer and then finish it off with a few tugs from the straightener. By this time, he was no stranger to his mom's flat iron. To ensure his curls could not plot their revenge as he slept, he suffocated them with a thick beanie all night.

One school morning, Chris woke up and felt thick grooves in his hair. He blinked until his eyes focused and saw his beanie lying on the ground. The light from his phone casted a glow onto his face and the time read 7:50am. Mortified, he rushed to the bathroom to see his curls springing out in between his creased hair. Gathering a chunk of his pomade, he saturated his hair in the sticky goo dragging it back with all his force. He left his curls covered in a mold of glazed grease as he rushed to school.

Though Chris was used to comments made about his hair that he dismissed as jokes, this day was even worse. The men around him always had conventional haircuts and styles that accentuated straight, silky hair. “It is pretty scary knowing you have such different hair than everyone else,” Chris told me. They all made confidence look effortless, unaware of all the burden and pressure that Chris constantly endured just to feel good about himself. Chris felt isolated in his strive for self compassion, never believing that people would know how to help. Even with the support of the very few people he confided in about his hair, he never felt it could be a real part of him.

When I plunged Chris’s head in my bathroom sink, I didn’t think about how much it would one day influence my own journey. I always felt so privileged listening to Chris speak to me about his natural hair. In a way, I wanted to do for him what I could not yet do for myself. I knew how much more courage and harmony I would feel if I just embraced my hair and, among many things, these were feelings Chris was so deserving of, too. I asked him if I could style his curly hair which led to the very predictable and abrupt response of “absolutely not.” Maybe I am extremely convincing, because after that day Chris never straightened his hair again. I sent him home with my favorite styling cream and he began getting to know his marvelous curls.

After this, Chris confidently wore his curls wherever he went, captivating people with his courageous vulnerability. “People looked at me like I was a whole new person,” he told me. Or they asked if he got a perm, a question you should definitely get ready for if you are just starting your curly hair journey. Chris began to understand how special his hair was and how much he loved the way they instantly caught your eye. Today, it is one of his favorite features about himself and a permanent accessory that complements his 90s fashion taste.

Chris possessed the power to make this change within him all along, all he needed was a small nudge to believe it. “It is all about change and if you are up for it,” he tells me. He no longer wanted to erode and neglect such a valuable part of himself. Through his journey, he prioritized patience and consideration in order to regain his self confidence and compassion. Today, he feels passionate about reclaiming what was once such a distant part of himself. “At the end of the day, your hair is nobody else’s but your own,” he tells me with a lightness in his breath and a head of thick, thriving curls.