

## **The Day I Lost My Hair**

**By Stephanie Awotwi-Pratt**

I distinctly remember the day I decided to cut all of my hair off. Living in rural England, my family were the only African people that lived in the small village of Bramley. I was considered strange, interesting, new, and exotic. The first few days in my elementary school were filled with new sights, sounds and people. I was nervous, small, shy and vulnerable. My thick and texturized black hair was bunched up into two large curly tufts on either side of my head. My mother fussed over my hair for hours prior to school starting. By lunch, it was in disarray.

Esme routinely harassed and demeaned my appearance. However, today, I was at my breaking point. I cautiously approached the monkey bars anticipating Esme's cruel words. Only a couple of girls swung from the bars and snickered in unison. I cowered in fear from their expression, and in anticipation of Esme's appearance. My palms began to sweat. My school shoes began to scuff as I plodded along to the far side of the playground. In fear and fright of what was to come, I tripped and fell onto my knees. One of the school teachers ran quickly to my aid and knelt beside me, making sure that I was okay. I began to softly cry as words could not express my pain and fear. I struggled to utter words in between soft muffled tears: "I- am-hurt -Esme -hurt - me." "Well,

no she didn't, Stephanie," she quickly responded. "Esme isn't here, silly. Now let's get you in and clean you up, you need to stop making these stories up, you know. You aren't in Africa anymore."

I picked myself up and quietly shuffled behind her, her hands tugging tightly on mine. As we reached the school building, she met with another teacher and said that I was making silly stories up again, and that it must have been the "African in me." I quietly tilted my head down and followed her heels. Once inside the cold and dreary classroom, she gestured for me to sit on one of the small green chairs before she went to collect a First Aid Kit. I sat in the large gloomy classroom alone and afraid. The lights dimly lit the room as I scanned for any sign of Esme. After the fall on the playground, my hair was tousled about my head. In a failed attempt, I used my bruised hands to straighten up my kinky curls from my sweaty forehead.

She walked in. I lifted my head up and away from my bruised hand and focused on the small figure entering the room. Esme. A chill ran down my spine. Her pale skin caught the light as she entered the room. Her silky, bouncy, brown hair danced around her neck as she approached the table that I was perched beside. She softly snickered to herself like the little girls from the monkey bars, her goons. She broke the low-pitched hums to finally address me. "What are you doing in here you little nigger, you don't belong here."

Her words hung like black clouds in the air.

I felt empty.

Although the words weren't altogether clear, I felt them pierce within me. She went on to say "Oh look at your messy dirty black hair, did you get it all dirty again? It looks disgusting, hair shouldn't look like that, look at mine, this is how it should be, you and your dirty little skin, you shouldn't be here." Her remarks followed with the question: "Has the cat bit your tongue, or can't you hear me? Or do you only speak African with your pet tiger?" I cocked my head up and sarcastically responded with an exaggerated roar followed by:

"No, Demi the tiger couldn't fit on the plane to England." Her eyes widened then just as quickly, she scrunched her delicate features into a soured expression. "I am going to tell Miss that you are bullying me, and you will get into lots of trouble." Before turning to leave, she took a section of my hair in her hands and tugged with so much force my head jolted to the side. She then stuck her tongue out and skipped out of the classroom.

My muffled cries began to elevate as her words hit me.

How could I be more disgusting?

I wondered who I was and what I was doing here? I rubbed my scalp in order to soothe the sore, then held onto my hair in agony - not just from the bruises on my body - but now from the words she left behind.

The teacher finally entered the room to find me as fragile as when she left me, and by now, Esme was out of the room when I overheard the teacher telling her to go and play outside. The teacher soon after approached me, her facial expression filled with pity and ridicule. Her pale hands enclosed my small dark bruised hand, as she wiped the dirt off of the wound I could not help but compare her complexion with my own as I stared at her eyes, face and hair. Her golden blonde hair cascaded around her face as she concentrated on fixing my wounds. I simply said to her “You are pretty, Miss. I wish I had your hair.” She stopped nursing the wounds and a disapproving expression came across her face. She simply looked at my hair and grimaced before returning to the wound.

Again, I felt empty.

Unattainably unattainable.

I never felt more othered.

The absence of her words said everything.

Later that day, after school, my mother picked me up. I didn’t so much as speak about what had happened that day at school, regardless of all of her questioning. Soft sobs poured out and covered my face as the tears filled my sinuses while I firmly held my mother’s hand all the way home.

Once inside the house, I ran up the stairs so quickly that I felt as if

I was floating up into the clouds,

suspended,

up,

up,

and away from all of my problems. The feeling of suspension was quickly dashed once I reached the top of the stairs and a flood of feelings began to pour in. I finally tuned in to my surroundings and approached the bathroom, then shut the door behind me. Once there, I used a small footstool and placed it under the sink before climbing on top and looking at myself in the mirror. I gently moved my matted dark hair out of my eyes and looked at myself in disdain. I looked down to wash my hand and saw the dull blue scissors laying on the edge of the sink, and the Dove soap on the soap dish.

I took the scissors first into my small hands,

I could barely grip them and clasped a chunk of hair into my hands

and began cutting.

My hair fell from my head like small black tufts of confetti decorated around the bathroom tiles. Once I was satisfied with one side of my head, I picked up the Dove soap and scrubbed my hair until my scalp ached. Defeated and exhausted, I collapsed and laid on the cold tile and began to sob. I realized that not only was I ripped of part of my identity, but also my self-worth.

I was so absorbed with my situation that I did not notice my mother quietly entering into the room. I lay in the fetal position as I softly cried to myself. My mother collected me up from the floor, and held me close to her chest as she softly sang to me in Ghanaian:

Awurauma men su,  
((my Ghanaian name) please don't cry)  
Wu ye fɛfɛɛfɛ  
(You are so beautiful)  
Men ma won casa sa  
(Don't let them say anything about you)  
medɔ wo  
(because I love you)

She cradled me in her arms for what felt like hours while softly murmuring the song in my ears over and over again. After some time, my tears began to dry, and I began to feel secure, loved, supported, and accepted by the one person that loved me the most.