

I Don't Know How to Brush My Hair

I did not know how to brush my hair.

I remember standing in front of a mirror with a brush in my hand and feeling as though I had been handed a tool without instructions. I lifted a section of hair and dragged the brush from the top down, only to feel it snag halfway. The pull was sudden and sharp. My scalp burned. I tried again, harder, as if force could replace knowledge. It did not. The knot tightened. The pain rose. I dropped the brush into the sink and told myself it didn't matter.

When my mother left to work overseas, I was two years old. At that age, departures do not feel like departures. Someone disappears from the frame, and the child adjusts to whoever remains. I grew up in my grandparents' house, where love was practical and steady. My grandmother made sure I ate. My grandfather walked me to school. They gave me safety. They gave me a routine. But no one stood behind me in the mornings with a comb in their hand.

As a child, I played under the scorching sun without thinking about my hair. I ran until sweat soaked the roots and dust clung to the strands. My hair stuck to my neck like a second layer of skin. I pushed it away when it blocked my eyes. I tied it loosely when it annoyed me. It was not something I styled; it was something I carried.

At school, I began to notice the other girls. They came with colourful hair clips, bows balanced neatly on their heads, pink barrettes catching the light. Their hair was parted in straight lines. Their braids were tight and symmetrical. Outside the classroom, sometimes I would see a mother crouching behind her daughter, fingers moving with quiet precision. A comb parted hair cleanly. An elastic snapped softly. A hand smoothed stray strands back into place before letting go.

My hair hung loose and uneven down my back. I wore it down not as a statement but because I did not know what else to do. I did not know how to section it. I did not know how to braid it. I wondered, silently, if colourful clips were part of the rulebook of being a girl. If they were, why had no one handed me the page?

Knots formed at the back of my head where I could not see them. I would feel them with my fingers and pretend they were not there.

When I finally decided to learn how to brush it properly, I did so alone.

I stood in front of the mirror and pulled the brush from the top down again, repeating the mistake because I did not know there was another way. The bristles caught. My scalp stung. Tears welled up before I could stop them. I felt foolish for crying over something so ordinary. I felt angry at my hair for resisting me. I felt angry at myself for not knowing.

It hurt more because there was no one behind me.

Eventually, I learnt to start from the ends and work my way up. To hold the hair above the knot so it would not pull the scalp. The pain lessened. The knots loosened.

Later, I straightened my hair, pressing heat against curls until they flattened into compliance. Straight hair was easier to manage, easier to brush, easier to present. But humidity would return my hair to itself. The curls would swell. The strands would resist being controlled.

I learnt how to braid other people's hair. Left over middle. Right over middle. My fingers memorized the pattern quickly. I could braid a friend's hair neatly, evenly, without hesitation. But when I tried to braid my own hair, my arms ached. I could not see the back of my head. The strands slipped from my grip. The braid loosened unevenly.

It was harder than I expected.

And then, one afternoon, a thought arrived quietly: maybe she did not know either.

Maybe my mother had stood in front of a mirror once, brush in hand, unsure where to begin. Maybe she pulled too hard because no one taught her patience. Maybe she never had someone braid her hair before school.

In many Asian families, mothers leave so that children can stay. They cross oceans to send money home. They clean other people's houses. They care for strangers so their own children can eat.

Who brushed her hair when she was young? Did anyone smooth her flyaways before she left for school? Or did she learn alone, the way I did?

When I imagined my mother as a child, hair tangled, hands inexperienced, something in me softened. I pictured her in a small bathroom, pulling a brush through stubborn knots. I pictured her flinching at the sting. I pictured her deciding that independence was easier than waiting for help that might never come.

We inherited more than texture. We inherited self-reliance.

There are parts of my hair that felt heavy with that inheritance. Ends that seemed to carry years of misunderstanding. Eventually, I decided to cut it.

Sitting on the hair salon chair, I watched as the scissors closed around a thick section. The sound was clean and final. Hair slid down the cape and fell to the floor in dark coils. I felt a sudden lightness, followed by grief I did not expect.

The dead ends were not mistakes; they were years. They were the little girl who watched other mothers at the gate. They were the child who pulled too hard because she did not know better.

Now, my hair still tangles in the wind. It still frizzes in humidity. But I know how to care for it. I brush from the ends. I hold it gently. I take my time.

My mother eventually showed me how she brushes hers. It happened casually, without ceremony. She told me to start from the bottom. She laughed at how I used to pull too hard. It was a small exchange, almost forgettable. But for me, it was the first time I felt her hands guiding mine.

It might have come late. It might not rewrite the mornings when I stood alone before the mirror. But it exists now.

Sometimes I imagine meeting the younger version of my mother. I imagine sitting behind her with a brush, telling her to sit still, telling her she is not difficult for being tangled. I imagine her turning around and doing the same for me.

If time could braid itself, perhaps that is what it would look like: strands crossing over one another, holding firm despite tension.

I cannot place a bow into the hair of my six-year-old self. I cannot summon a mother at the school gate. But I can choose how I hold the brush now.

My hair grows quietly. So do I.