The Power of Changing Your *Hair*

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I have known women who have never touched their hair — a mere haircut makes them nervous — and I have known women that are severely unhappy unless their hair is a bright fuschia.

I tend to fall somewhere between these two extremes. I get bored with my hair every six weeks and have to do something new to it. I will grab kitchen shears and cut until I'm satisfied, then two weeks later, I want it long. I will bleach, tone, and darken my hair as quickly as the wind changes directions. But why do I feel an almost compulsive need to change such a defining feature?

Humans have always defined others by their physical features. For women, hair is a big one. We associate certain hair lengths and colors with certain attributes. We see this depicted in the art world, with long hair on young women as a sign of fertility and youth. In recent media, short hair is typically shown on older female characters. And think of all the obnoxious sayings we have for blondes. So much of a woman's identity seems wrapped up in what's sitting on top of her head.

I grew up with very long, very blonde hair. I did not get a haircut until sixth grade, and by then it was such a thick sheet of hair that even I acknowledged the need for a cut. About a foot was cut off, and I was so horrified by this that I waited until freshman year to change it again. Completely self-aggrandizing my own maturity, I bought a box of bright red hair dye and colored the underlayer of my (still) long blonde hair. To be honest, it did not look great, but I loved it. I loved how stunned people were that a 15-year-old girl from a well-to-do private school in the South did something to her hair other than bleach it white.

By the time I was 16, I too wanted that elusive bleach-white hair. I had always struggled with my weight as a child, and at this point I had just begun running which caused me to lose weight. I started to look like my peers and I wanted hair to match. I no longer wanted to stand out but to assimilate. I wanted to be like the other 'hot girls' in my school, and I thought if I changed my hair I would become one.

So I went to a hairdresser who bleached the hell out of my hair, and she ruined it. But I kept this unflattering brassy blonde shade that gave me so much confidence. I believed that it made me something. The belief was reinforced by how vastly differently men started to treat me — they noticed me. I now understand that it wasn't my hair but the fact that I was done with puberty by 16, and I looked like a woman. In fact, my constantly grown-out roots and two-toned zebra hair did not highlight my face at all. At a hair appointment at the beginning of junior year, where I was supposed to go even lighter, I went brown.

I hated that color more than life itself. I purposely only have three pictures of my hair from that summer. I had asked for a true brown, and it looked like I had rubbed mud into my blonde hair and left it out to dry. I finally got fed up with it and went to the store, bought a box of dye, and went to town. I loved the final product — a rich mahogany that left my hair shiny for what felt like the first time in years.

It was the brown I loved, the brown I enjoyed so much. It was the brown that I became truly confident in. Brown isn't showy; I garnered attention because of myself and not my hair. I grew into myself with that color, because I allowed myself to be less concerned about what was on my head. It was the hair that I finished out my senior year with, the hair that I took to my first semester of college. It was my dark and sexy bedroom hair that traveled with me everywhere.

But the man I was fucking preferred blondes, so I bleached my hair again. I did it aggressively one afternoon, and I killed it. Murdered it. I quickly dyed the ruined mass of orange back and had to cut

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off seven inches, leaving my hair right above my shoulders. I played right back into my 16-year-old self — I wanted to be validated and I searched for it in a bottle of bleach.

I had never hated my hair more. It was short and so dark, it was almost black. To make myself feel better, I gradually lightened it, throwing highlights in at random. Over quarantine, still with the same man and the same desire for control in a time when I had none, I kept bleaching my hair. So for a while, I had orange hair that just brushed my shoulders. After literal months of working at it, I remembered that toner exists, and overnight my brassy blonde became a slinky, cool-toned color.

Yet, I still miss the natural curl I once had, the curl that months of bleaching and trimming my hair have removed. I miss bedroom curls. Now when I wake up in the morning, I have a frizzy, messy helmet that is only tamed with an embarrassing amount of leave-in conditioner. But with the help of styling tools and my roommate's expertise, I have learned to reclaim my natural hair texture.

I have changed, and will continue to change, my hair as I become bored with it. My journey with my hair is the closest thing I have to a wardrobe staple. I could not be more grateful for my parents' latitude when it came to changing my hair — it allowed me my freedom of expression, and it is my favorite sign of freedom.