

# Chapter One

## My Hair History

### How I Learned What Not to Do

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I used to think my hair was possessed. When I tried to comb or brush it, it turned into a frizzled netting. I used to feel like something was wrong with me because of my hair. Once I learned how to care for it, however, it became a cherished friend. I've found that with only a few simple changes in care, those same curls that once seemed possessed are now a feature I'm proud to have and are a joy to grow.

I arrived at this hard-won truth through years of fighting my hair and hating it, until I finally learned to love it as it is. By struggling against my natural hair, I turned what could have been sweet-natured curls into a broken beast. I wish I had known these things when I was younger; my teenage years would not have been so burningly awkward.

## 2 Curly Like Me

I wrote this book because I understand what it's like to go for years without knowing what to do with your hair and with little information available for guidance. I wanted others with very curly hair like mine to benefit from everything I learned during three decades of floundering. By reading this book, you won't have to struggle for answers anymore. *Curly Like Me* will serve as your "one-stop shopping" resource for very curly hair, where you can find information on your hair structure; what causes damage and how to prevent it; how to care for your curls; the best products, tools, and ingredients to use; and what happens when you use chemicals. I also include ideas for hairstyles that enhance your curls. This advice is streamlined and simple, because I want to show you how even the most uncoordinated person (such as myself) can easily enjoy her curls without employing an army of stylists. This book will tell you not only how to manage your curls, but also how to actually make them happy.

No prior experience is assumed, so a person who has never combed a curl in her life will be taught how to groom a head full of curls. This book is meant for people like me, who are not hairdressers and who don't have the time or energy to style their hair in elaborate, labor-intensive styles. *Curly Like Me* empowers you to take back the care of your own hair. It gives you the secrets to growing very long natural hair without feeling you must use costly treatments, products, or stylists.

The way to grow very long hair is simple: eliminate all sources of damage, and your hair will grow to its maximum length. The challenge, however, is that almost every conventional technique of caring for curly hair like ours causes damage. This book explains, step by step, how to care for your hair with almost zero damage. I do not promote trends, fads, or gimmicks. Even if some of what I say doesn't happen to be the most popular belief at the time, these techniques are the ones that work. I approach understanding your curls from many angles. First, I describe the highlights of my journey in learning how to take care of my hair. By repeatedly mangling my hair and after suffering through countless unfortunate hairstyles, I learned what didn't work for my curls. I also realized that by eliminating every product and procedure that would damage my hair, there was nothing to stop it from growing beautifully.

Next, *Curly Like Me* includes basic facts on the structure of hair and the

bonds that hold the components of each individual hair together. Some of this information gets pretty technical, but it helps explain why your hair acts the way it does and what holds it together. This way, you'll learn what hurts your hair and how to avoid damaging it.

I'll describe each stage of caring for your hair, from washing and conditioning to combing extremely curly hair and to explaining how to grow it to its maximum length. I'll discuss which products work with your curls to make them much easier to groom. This will save you money you would spend on redundant products, as well as on those that don't work, and time you would waste on searching for magic products that don't exist. Although there are no miracle cures, and no product will substitute for good hair care and eliminating damage, you'll learn to use everyday products in unexpected ways to achieve amazing results. I'll tell you what ingredients to look for and to avoid and will give you product recommendations.

I'll also talk about what really happens when we apply chemicals to our hair. That section thoroughly explains the chemical bonds in our hair; it is at this molecular level where all the reactions take place when we permanently alter our curls. You don't have to read these chapters in order to use the techniques I'll teach you, though. This is a reference book on all aspects of tightly coiled hair, so feel free at first to skip around and use whatever chapters are helpful to you. Maybe after you find answers to your basic care questions, you'll become curious about the deeper structures within your curls.

I included photographs of hairstyles you can use to showcase your spiraling curls. These styles can be created quickly and easily, and you'll find instructions and illustrations for how to proceed. Most of these styles took only a few minutes each to achieve. There was no stylist standing by to make sure every strand was in place. I didn't use gel, hairspray, or styling tools of any sort (except my hands). I created each style myself, glanced in the mirror once when I was finished, sometimes made an adjustment or two, and took the picture with a timer.

Your curls might be a bit tighter or looser than mine, but the tips in this book will work if your hair is truly curly. Although you might need to modify my advice to suit your own unique curls, these ideas are a great starting point to help you understand how to work with your hair. None

of these techniques will damage any type of hair but, rather, will help you enhance your curls rather than squish them down, hide them, alter them, or hurt them. Knowing how to care for your hair is much like opening a combination lock. Not only do you need to know all of the numbers and in what order they appear; you also need to be aware of which number to spin twice. Growing long, healthy curls is a similar process. You need to know all the techniques to grow your hair long and also figure out how they fit together. The lock won't open if you don't know which number has to go around twice, and growing healthy hair is much the same. You could be doing everything else right, but if you're still damaging your hair with one aspect of your regimen, it won't grow.

## My Hair History



Before:  
My chemically  
damaged hair



and after:  
my natural curls

I learned the hard way how to take care of my hair. Every useful technique I discovered was despite my own thick-headedness. Apparently, I'm one of those people who must try what doesn't work before she can find what does. I threw myself into each new attempt to change my hair and ended up with even worse hair damage than before I'd started. Only after I had tried everything to change what I was born with and had seen it fail did I finally stop running from my curls. I decided to face them, accept what I had, and make peace with them, and that was when everything changed. Following are the highlights of my journey.

Ever since I can remember, I wanted long mermaid hair—hair that flowed down my back, locks that I could toss dramatically over my shoulders. When I was a child, I stared at girls with hair longer than

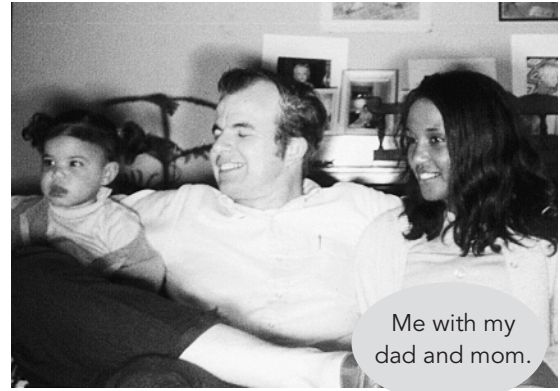
mine and tried to figure out how they got theirs to grow that way. It has taken me more than thirty years to learn how to have long hair falling down my back in a riot of spirals. Every lesson I learned, unfortunately, was at the expense of my hair. I was able to keep learning only because my curls kept growing back to give me one more chance to get it right.

## Relaxed

I came by my curls by being black and white, and when I was a child—up until about fourth grade—Momsey, my black grandmother on my mom's side, did my hair. Each night she spent an hour combing, smoothing in French Perm hairdressing, and sectioning my hair into about twenty little balls over my head. Every few months my hair was relaxed; every few weeks it was washed. My straight hair strained to reach partway down my back. Momsey alone seemed to have the magic touch. My relaxed hair was a fragile creature, and we all seemed to tiptoe around it.

I now think that because Momsey had been able to get my hair past my shoulders when I was a child, I spent the next twenty years trying to re-create what she had done (without success), instead of starting from scratch. Only after nothing worked for me did I try to do it my own way, without chemicals.

I spent my childhood summers in California with my dad, who is white. He and I were baffled by my hair, and he handled it the only way he knew how, which was to wash it with basic shampoo, not use any conditioner or moisturizer, blow it dry, brush it every day, and put it into two gigantic ponytail puffs with rubber bands. Because my hair had been relaxed during the school year, we could at least get a



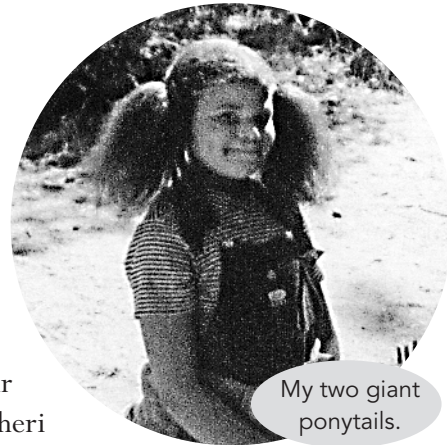
My third-grade school picture. My hair was a fragile thing, and lots of time and energy went into its maintenance.

## 6 Curly Like Me

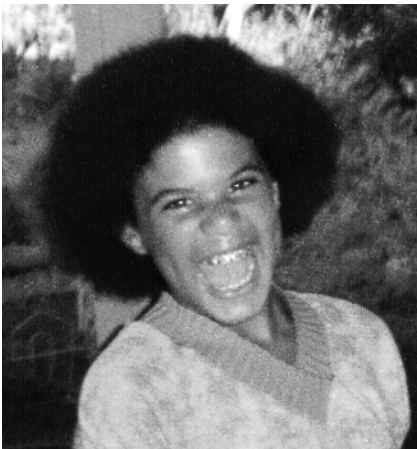
comb through it, if we were determined enough. Each year my hair got shorter.

My mom, distressed that my hair kept getting shorter instead of longer, took me to a hairdresser when I was eleven to see whether a professional could stop the damage. I was taken to a back room where, inexplicably, my hair was cut very short and I was given a Jheri curl. The curl was put on top of the relaxer that had been applied to my natural curls. I cried when I looked in the mirror and saw all my hair gone. It would take me more than eighteen years to figure out how to get it long again.

Over the summer I visited my dad, who saw the greasy activator I'd brought with me, and requested that I not use it. As the summer progressed, the dried-out Jheri curl became further damaged from the harsh shampoos, no conditioning rinses or any other moisturizers, and daily dry brushing. I just brushed my hair and tried to pat it into a round shape as best I could. Had I understood then that that tormented chemical mess wasn't what my natural hair was really like, I would never have



My two giant ponytails.



By the end of the summer, my triple-damaged hair (Jheri curl that was applied over the relaxer that was initially used on my curls, plus daily dry brushing) grew larger and stiffer.



This shows the crunchy texture of the dried-out Jheri curl.

gone through all of the ensuing battles with chemicals trying to avoid the hair I experienced that summer.

My grandmother on my father's side wanted to try to help me by styling my hair herself after hearing (probably for the thousandth time) my frustrated complaints about not knowing what to do with it. She had two daughters of her own, and she assured me that she knew how to do hair. One day during a summer visit, she worked earnestly to style my hair with her curling iron. My hair's consistency was like that of warm plastic. After that, my grandmother didn't bring up the subject of hair again. At the end of the summer, when I returned to my mom's house, my hair was immediately relaxed, and would continue to have chemicals in it for the next twenty years.



How my triple-damaged hair looked after styling with a curling iron.

In my early teens, I moved to California during the school months and was suddenly left alone with my hair full time. I put relaxer on it to tame the curls and always ended up burning myself. My clumsy application of the chemicals left second-degree burns and scabs behind my ears for weeks. My hair was so damaged, it broke off at my shoulders, and it was still unmanageable. After I washed my hair, my arms ached from trying to get a comb through it. I spent hours trying to comb it, and still it was a fuzzy nest. I often ended up with the comb tangled in my hair at some point during the process. Frantic, I mentally yelled at my hair and usually ended up in tears before I was finished combing and setting it. Suffering from its own torment, my hair continued to arc off my head as if my scalp were electrified.

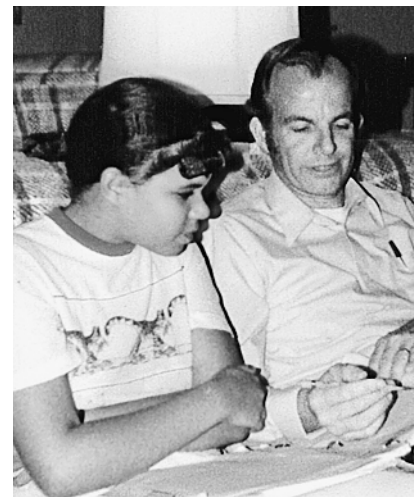
It was just that hair and me alone together, and I tried everything I could think of to make it presentable. I wrangled curlers and rollers into it each night. Then I couldn't sleep because they jabbed my head all over, and I became an insomniac. In the morning, my hair would still be half-wet in the back and would fuzz when I took out the curlers. I looked for



The only way I could wear my relaxed hair was by strapping it down as tightly as possible.



It was so stiff that it stuck up in the air when I wore it in ponytails or braids. This is me at a very crabby moment.



Me, my dad, and my curlers. I put my hair in curlers at night because I couldn't think of anything else to do with it.

a magic shampoo, conditioner, treatment, or ingredient to make it act like everyone else's naturally straight hair, then I searched for a miraculous hairdressing to weigh it down and make it grow, as they all promised to do. But all that these potions and lotions left behind were grease stains on everything my hair came in contact with. I startled people whenever I wore a white T-shirt to school. My back and shoulders were always covered in broken hair bits, as if I'd gotten caught in a violent hair-snipping storm.

When I put my hair into a braid, I needed a ponytail holder made of onyx to fasten it. Onyx was the only thing heavy enough to weigh down the braid. Without it, my braid stuck out like an antenna, as if intently listening to something far up in the sky.

I went to an all-white school (well, sometimes there was one other person of color in the entire school), and I lived with my all-straight-haired white side of the family. Heck, even my brother had wavy hair. People



This was my usual hairstyle during most of high school.



around me could easily run combs through their hair like it was no big deal. Their combs would emerge from the ends of their untangled hair, which then flowed back into place as if nothing had happened. They shrugged off rain or wind. Their hair was shiny and long, and they could toss it in the wind. They could braid it casually, and the braids lay where they put them. My hair seemed to enjoy singling me out and making sure I never forgot I was different. I hated my hair, so I punished it as severely as I felt punished by it.

## Salons

When I was fifteen, my dad took me to a salon to get my hair professionally relaxed, to see whether that might work better for me than doing it myself. The chemicals seared my scalp—the hairdresser left them on for the full amount of time. Then she put me in tight rollers under a hot hood dryer. She burned my forehead when she used the curling iron on my bangs, and teased my hair in a bouffant hairdo. Afterward, my hair was crunchy and my scalp ached, as if my hair had been put on way too tight. My head glowed with heat for days, and I knew that this wasn't the solution I wanted either. So I kept walking around with my shirts covered in broken hair bits while I cast about for a better way.

Every couple of years I took a pair of household scissors and, in frustration, hacked off my hair down to a few inches. Just after I cut it all off in the summer before eleventh grade, I dyed my hair bright orange and decided something had to be done.

## Locks

In twelfth grade I tried dreadlocks. I thought locks were exotic and lovely and maybe my ticket to long, flowing hair. That I had no idea how to grow them didn't slow me down. I thought my hair would just naturally separate and lock on its own if I simply stopped combing it for long enough. Instead, after a few months of not being combed, my hair turned into a solid mat on my head. I tore it apart in sections and then cut out chunks to form the individual locks.



Pre-dreads:  
I was cultivating my unimat. Not knowing how to start locks, I rubbed my hair with a towel. Of course, this just made my hair turn into one large mat.



My hair was usually orange or red at this time.

After I had separated my mats into individual locks, I waited impatiently for my hair to finally grow. The individual locks stuck straight out all over my head like the spines of a sea urchin, refusing to lie flat. I sewed glass beads onto each lock to weigh it down. Every few months I measured one of them. In a year, they hadn't grown. Near the end of twelfth grade, I finally chopped them off with kitchen scissors and was back to short hair again. (I now know that my hair actually *was* growing, but because it was also still locking and tightening at the same time, its growth and the process of locking probably just evened each other out.)

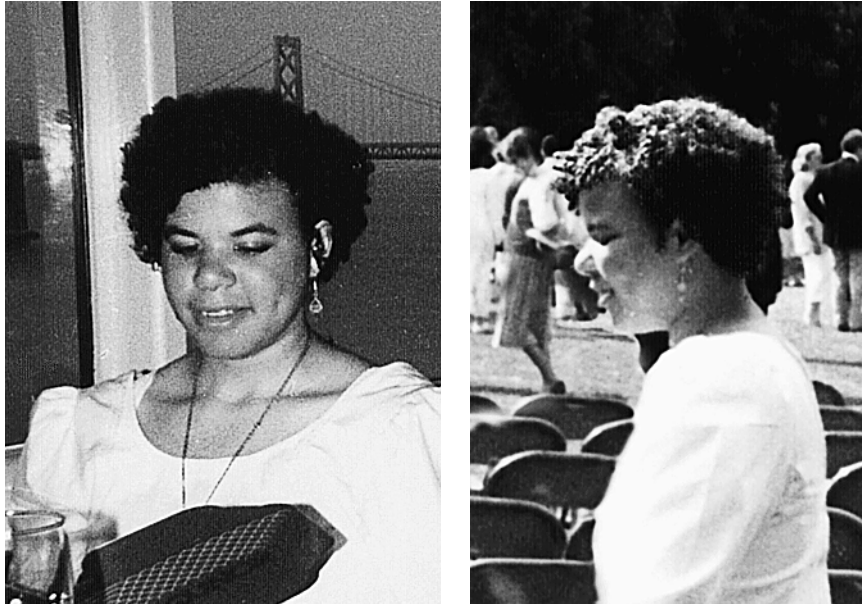
Mistakenly thinking that the hair I'd experienced after the Jheri curl *was* what my natural hair was like, I decided to relax my hair again. To have those curls with no restraint seemed so out of the question, I didn't even consider it.



Here I am with locks that never grew and the beads sewn in to keep them weighed down (you can see the bands of beads as white in my hair in these photos).



My dreads, with my brother behind me.



I'd cut off my locks with kitchen scissors by graduation.

## The Fateful Relaxer

Although it had been more than a year since I'd last used a perm, I felt like I still remembered the drill when I brought it home from the store. It was early summer at my mom's house in Kentucky. I opened the larger jar in the relaxer kit, nonchalantly slathered it on my head, and waited the given amount of time. When I rinsed my hair, I was annoyed to see that nothing had happened. I checked the instructions and saw, too late, that I should have mixed the ingredients. I promptly bought another relaxer kit to do it right this time.

The second time around, everything seemed fine until I went to rinse. The relaxer wouldn't come out. With the addition of water, my hair had turned into a gooey paste. I rinsed and shampooed repeatedly, growing more panicked each time. As the goo reluctantly gave way, my hair came out with it—in handfuls that filled the sink basin. When my hair was dry, what was left of it crunched like a dead leaf. The next day, I put on a hat and went shopping for weaves.

## Weaves

In search of the elusive mermaid hair, I walked into a weave shop for the first time. All my life I had wanted long, thick hair to throw dramatically back over my shoulders, and suddenly there was an entire wall filled with just such hair in every beautiful color and texture. And any of them could be mine. I started out with dark honey-brown wefts in a straightened texture; these seemed to match the color of my damaged hair. After a little instruction from the man behind the counter, I was wearing my new weave.



Me looking artsy—but not happy—in my bulky weave.

I loved it. At last, I instantly had the hair I'd dreamed of, flowing past my shoulders. Finally, I could pull it back in a long ponytail or braid, and it hung the way I had always imagined hair should. It didn't matter about the rain or the wind or the humidity. I felt like a movie star and immediately became addicted to weaves. Every couple of weeks I visited the shop again to try a new length or texture. When I took my new hair home on the bus, I'd open the bag it was in and smell that new hair smell wafting faintly from inside its paper cocoon.

There were some significant drawbacks to the weaves, however. The foremost was that they were easy to see. The weft was always a challenge to hide near the hairline. You could see that strip of fabric the hair was sewn into, so a big part of doing my hair was thinking of ways to hide it. My own hair was too short and crunchy to do a good job of covering it, so I ended up wearing a scarf around my head most of the time to hide where the weave started.

The weaves were also very hard to take down and comb, and they always seemed to be shedding. I glued the hair to the weft to keep it from coming out, but that made it lumpier on my head. Beneath my weave lurked a broken mess, but I prized the feel of long and thick hair too much to think about what was really going on under the facade.

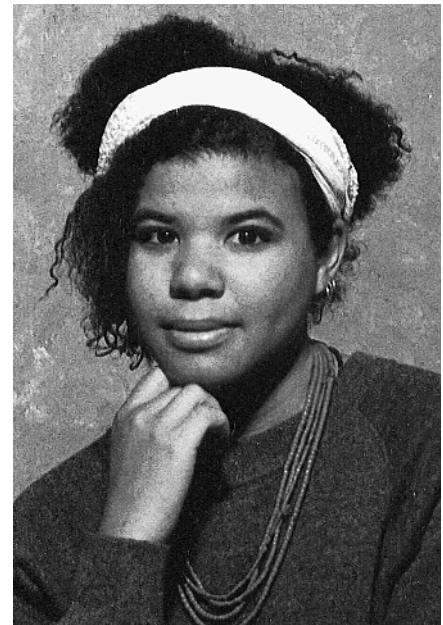
My biggest fear with weaves was of detection. I was a fake. It was not my

own hair, and I was always afraid people could tell—which I'm sure they could. I kept imagining, for example, a cute guy putting his hand in my hair, unexpectedly contacting the tumorlike lumps of the wefts and snatching his hand away in horror and betrayal. I was determined to have glamorous hair that was less detectable. This was the reason I began to wear extensions.

## Extensions

I bought bags of loose hair and tried to figure out how to put it in. At the time I couldn't find any literature on how to do it, but stuff like that doesn't seem to stop me. I experimented with how to get the additional hair to stay in my existing hair. One of my earlier attempts was to clip the loose ends of the extension hair to the beginning of my hair and simply start braiding the two together. After putting in a few dozen braids, the loose hairs of the extension poked into my scalp and itched to the point that I had to take them out. A friend who had them finally showed me how her hairdresser had put them in. I tried using nylon hair, but it looked like doll hair. Besides, it would frizzle in the blast of heat from an opened oven if I was standing too close and not paying attention.

To save the hundreds to thousands of dollars it would have cost to have my hair done by people who knew what they were doing, I did my hair on my own. It took weeks of working on it for three or four hours a night until I got all of the braids in. By the time I finished the back, it was time to redo the front. I grew more reluctant to tackle combing out each braid, because my hair was locking into the extensions. I procrastinated for nearly a year, until the fear of my hair bonding to the braids motivated me to take them out.

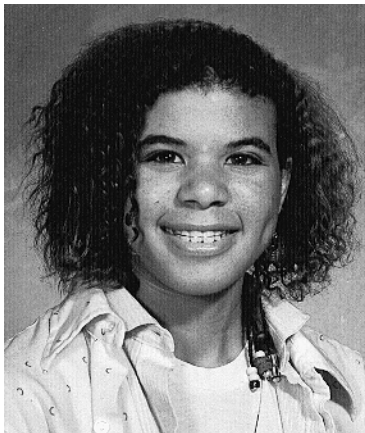


This is what my hair looked like when I took out the weaves. It was just starting to grow in after the Fateful Relaxer. At night I slept in a bandanna to try to smash down my hair.

I spent twenty-four hours tearing out the extensions, which left me with a head full of hundreds of cylindrical mats, all netted together. The following day it took me eight hours to comb these appendages out. When I was finished, I ended up with a fuzz ball the size of a Pomeranian. I decided that I didn't have enough discipline to keep up with this style, so again it was time to look for an alternative that worked for me.

## Texturizing

I went back to the chemicals, but this time I tried texturizing: leaving the relaxer on for a shorter amount of time, just to loosen the curl. I'd worn my hair this way for a while in high school, and I recalled that it had required the least amount of maintenance of all my 'dos. I texturized for several years. Although I liked the curls, they were highly damaged, frizzed easily, and were unpredictable. With high humidity or too much wind, they turned into a big halo of fuzz (not that there's anything wrong with a halo of fuzz; I didn't like feeling trapped into only one look, and at the time, I desperately wanted my hair to act more like the straighter hair of those around me). I used gel and mousse in my attempt to define and



Texturized through the years: in high school, in eleventh grade (in the middle picture, I hacked off the front of my hair down to half an inch), and in young adulthood. My face expresses how my chemically texturized hair must have been feeling.

emphasize the curls and prevent the frizz, but these products made them tight and stiff, like lots of little crunchy strings.

Once, while experimenting with texturizing in high school, I ended up with one side of my hair straight, the other side curly. I couldn't afford more perm at the time, so every morning I intently scrunched up the straight side and tried to flatten out the curly side so that they matched. It didn't work. My straight/curly head fascinated yet puzzled my friends in my all-naturally-straight-haired school, who were especially struck by the seam at the back of my head where the two types of hair met.

### Bit o' Everything

There were a couple years when I had multiple styles going on at once. I had lots of new growth, texturized hair, relaxed hair, and even a few braided extensions thrown in for good measure.

During all of my experiments, what concerned me the most was that my hair would not grow. It shied away from my shoulders as if they were dangerous. I knew better than to let my hair blow in



You can see my extensions in this photo. I put in only a few of them, just in the front, for some reason. I think I liked hair hanging in my face at that time.

My puffy texturized/relaxed hair (with my angry cat, Elmer).

the wind, and there was nothing to swing over my shoulders. If texturizing had been the right option for my hair, I decided, it would thrive and grow to its maximum length, not continue to break off. Because my hair was still short, it meant that texturizing wasn't the answer.

This realization became my turning point: I felt as if I'd tried everything, and nothing had worked. So, if everything I tried didn't work, what about trying nothing?

I'd once read a magazine article that said the less you do to your hair, the healthier it will be. Where did that leave me? It's easy for the author to say that, I thought resentfully. I have to straighten my big mess of hair. My hair was so out of control *with* straightening, I couldn't even imagine what horrors would erupt without it. Then one day in a bookstore while searching for answers, I happened upon *Good Hair: For Colored Girls Who've Considered Weaves When the Chemicals Became Too Ruff* by Lonnice Brittenum Bonner. This brave author had grown out her relaxer and had lived to tell about it. Reading about her experience, I felt that if she could do it, then I had no excuse for not trying.

## Growing It Out, Setting It Free

Too chicken to cut off all of my hair, I chose to grow the chemicals out instead. Yet growing it out was much harder than simply cutting off the chemicals and starting fresh. For the first few months, my hair matted where the two types of hair met, and my comb halted at the divide and didn't want to budge. Not only did my comb get stuck in the mat, the mat was too close to my scalp for me to keep it from being pulled and hurting. I hoped beyond hope that the mat was simply the place where the two textures of hair joined, not a waking monster slowly emerging from my scalp. I set my hair in two stranded twists to hide the different textures.

Over the next four months or so, to my relief, the mat line inched down my head. I realized that the comb was gliding through the new growth but halting at the boundary where the chemicals had been applied to my hair. This was a revelation and my first glimmer of hope. It meant that my new growth wasn't causing the trouble after all; it was the chemically damaged hair.



## When It Clicked

After eight months, I noticed something amazing. One night I lifted up the hair behind my ear and looked at the new growth coming in. There, for the first time, I saw my *real* hair. It was in a perfectly formed S-pattern that seemed as unique as my own fingerprint. The new growth was slippery, smoother than I'd ever felt my hair to be. The texture of my hair within that short length was firm and confident. It shone like obsidian. Realizing that this beautiful hair was waiting for me beneath the crunchy chemical hair, I couldn't stand to put it off any longer. I cut all of the old, broken, chemically damaged hair off my head. That stuff wasn't really my hair anyway.

For the first time in my life I saw what my real hair looked like. Confident and glossy, it was radically different from the chemically destroyed hair that had clung to the bottom of it.

Those new curls were vibrant and so different from the damaged mess I'd mistakenly thought was my hair all my life. Now that the damage was gone, my entire head of hair felt different from how it ever had before. It was soft and shiny, even directly after shampooing. The curls were firm and confident. I'd never experienced this creature before, and I became suddenly and fiercely protective of these fresh curls unfurling from my head like new fronds on a fern. If I could figure out a way to go without damaging them, I speculated, then my hair could potentially grow to its maximum length. Knowing that hair grows an average of six inches a year, I held a yardstick to the area behind my ear to see where the lengths would fall. How long would two years of growth be? Three years? Six years of unbroken growth? The yardstick reached past my stomach. Could my hair really grow that long? And with curls? That last question worried me. All of the literature I'd read said that really curly hair couldn't grow long, because weakness was built into every twist and turn in every strand of hair. This implied that my curly hair by its nature was flawed, destined to break before it even made it



What my new growth looked like the first time I saw it, gleaming against my broken, chemically treated hair.



My hair when most of the chemicals were first cut off. As my chemical-free hair was growing, I still wasn't sure what to do with it. My curls lost their definition when the weather was humid.

out of the gate. I examined the strands of my new curls. They looked like little springs, but the strands were continuous. To me, they didn't seem flawed or dented at every twist. So, I wondered, maybe it was the damage from trying to force these twists and turns to do something they weren't meant to do that had hurt them, and not something inherent in their structure?

Well, I *was* doing something radically different with my hair this time. I hoped I had figured out the missing puzzle piece I'd been looking for all along. Since that day when I first saw my real hair, I never straightened it again, and it grew year by year. The first couple of years of growth produced a crown of thick, glossy curls instead of the crunchy hair I'd gotten used to. It just kept growing longer and longer: to my shoulders, passing my shoulders, and down my back. All the while, I kept experimenting with how best to comb and style it, to make the most of its coils, and above all, to never harm it again.

## Conditioning and Separating

During this time, my hair and I were still getting to know each other. In rain or humid weather, my hair still blew up like a threatened puffer fish as the curls lost definition and expanded. They were still generally unpredictable, and I wanted to find a way to define those lovely

Although my hair was longer than it had ever been, it was still poufy and unpredictable. I searched for how to define my curls. My mother called lots of tiny waves erupting from a person's head a "porridge head," though I'm not sure why. I have a slicked-back porridge head here. In fact, I had lots of porridge action going on whenever it was humid.



new curls I had. Yet I now felt that my hair was my friend, and I wanted to work with it to make us as happy together as possible.

With my hair now reaching to the small of my back when wet, I discovered a technique that made all the difference: leaving the conditioner in and then separating my hair into individual curls. Separating them freed my curls to do their own thing; it defined each one, instead of my combing the curl until it merged into its neighbors. With each curl defined and soothed with conditioner, I could finally wear my hair in a long ponytail that hung heavy against my back. Humidity no longer mattered, nor did wind or rain. This, it turned out, was the final puzzle piece I'd been missing.

## Now

I no longer spend hours frustrated and trying to “fix” my hair and then many more hours attempting to undo whatever terrible thing I’ve done to “fix” it in the first place. At night, I simply twist it into a bun or a braid, and in the morning I take it down and style it in a couple of minutes. After a weekly combing, the rest of the week I might spend one to ten minutes a day on it, at the most. I can have my hair pinned up, and whenever I feel like it, I can unpin it and it falls down over my shoulders. My curls are good-natured—they let me do what I want with them as long as I don’t hurt them anymore, which seems to work out well for both of us.

Afros are fiercely beautiful. What I had when I was eleven, however, was not my natural hair. It was a chemically induced mess. The triple whammy of the relaxer, the Jheri curl over it, and no conditioner or moisturizer, plus the daily dry brushing left it stiff, crunchy, and brutalized. The unfortunate thing was, being a child, I didn’t realize that that hair wasn’t really my hair. I had no idea of the damage those chemical treatments did to it. I mistakenly thought that the way my hair felt, looked, and acted was what my hair was like when it was worn naturally curly. Because of this belief, it took me nearly twenty years to discover that that hair was not my real hair. And really, if you think about it, the way I have my hair now is simply a curly natural hair that’s grown down to my hips.

As my hair has grown longer, tight spirals at the end of each curl act like counterweights that pull the rest of the curl down. After twelve years of chemical-free growth, my hair is down to my hips. I use few products on my hair: shampoo, a couple of conditioners for variety, and occasionally a bit of olive or coconut oil on my ends in the driest days of winter. I no longer spend hundreds of dollars and frustrated hours in stores searching for some magic potion that will fix my hair. I know that product doesn't exist. Preventing damage and knowing how to treat my curls are the true magic formula and the only one that works.

Now I realize that for decades, I had tried to tame my curls into obedience by forcing them to conform to the kind of hair that others had. I treated my curls as if they weren't good enough in their natural state. Yet after all I had done to them, they couldn't be crushed. Patiently, they kept growing back, each new head of hair giving me yet one more chance to do better.

As I have found in life, sometimes the truth turns out not to be what I first thought I wanted. But whenever I accept it, embrace it, and learn to



I found that when I made peace with my hair, I made peace with myself.

celebrate the unique opportunity that the truth gives me to grow and to learn, I become richer for having done so. So it is with my hair. The hair I once felt so ashamed of has now become my best feature. You see, as it turns out, I have been given the gift of tightly spiraled hair that relatively few people have.

Your curls are wonderful and special. In the following pages, I'll tell you what I've discovered through decades of struggle and research, and I'll give you all of the keys I've found to help you make *your* beautiful curls naturally long, defined, and happy.



**TAKE AWAY**  
*Tips*

- Your energy is best spent learning to work with your hair, rather than fighting against it.
- Treat your curls like curls.
- Healthy, natural hair is easier and cheaper to care for than processed hair is.
- Your hair can grow to its maximum length when you eliminate the damage.
- Curls thrive when they're allowed to be themselves.

