

Hair

from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* *Malcolm X with Alex Haley*

Shorty soon decided that my hair was finally long enough to be conked. He had promised to school me in how to beat the barbershops' three- and four-dollar price by making up congolene and then conking ourselves.

I took the little list of ingredients he had printed out for me and went to a grocery store, where I got a can of Red Devil lye, two eggs, and two medium-sized white potatoes. Then at a drugstore near the poolroom, I asked for a large jar of Vaseline, a large bar of soap, a large-toothed comb and a fine-toothed comb, one of those rubber hoses with a metal sprayhead, a rubber apron, and a pair of gloves.

"Going to lay on that first conk?" the drugstore man asked me. I proudly told him, grinning, "Right!"

Shorty paid six dollars a week for a room in his cousin's shabby apartment. His cousin wasn't at home. "It's like the pad's mine, he spends so much time with his woman," Shorty said.

"Now, you watch me—"

2

He peeled the potatoes and thin-sliced them into a quart-sized Mason fruit jar, then started stirring them with a wooden spoon as he gradually poured in a little over half the can of lye. "Never use a metal spoon; the lye will turn it black," he told me.

A jellylike, starchy-looking glop resulted from the lye and potatoes, and Shorty broke in the two eggs, stirring real fast—his own conk and dark face bent down close. The congolene turned pale yellowish. "Feel the jar," Shorty said. I cupped my hand against the outside and snatched it away. "Damn right, it's hot, that's the lye," he said. "So you know it's going to

burn when I comb it in—it burns bad. But the longer you can stand it, the straighter the hair.”

He made me sit down, and he tied the string of the new rubber apron tightly around my neck and combed up my bush of hair. Then, from the big Vaseline jar, he took a handful and massaged it hard all through my hair and into the scalp. He also thickly Vaseline my neck, ears, and forehead. “When I get to washing out your head, be sure to tell me anywhere you feel any little stinging,” Shorty warned me, washing his hands, then pulling on the rubber gloves and tying on his own rubber apron. “You always got to remember that any congolene left in burns a sore into your head.”

3

The congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire.

I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off.

My eyes watered, my nose was running. I couldn’t stand it any longer; I bolted to the washbasin. I was cursing Shorty with every name I could think of when he got the spray going and started soap-lathering my head.

He lathered and spray-rinsed, lathered and spray-rinsed, maybe ten or twelve times, each time gradually closing the hot-water faucet, until the rinse was cold, and that helped some.

“You feel any stinging spots?”

“No,” I managed to say. My knees were trembling.

“Sit back down, then. I think we got it all out OK.”

4

The flame came back as Shorty, with a thick towel, started drying my head, rubbing hard. "Easy, man, easy!" I kept shouting.

"The first time's always worst. You get used to it better before long. You took it real good, homeboy. You got a good conk."

When Shorty let me stand up and see in the mirror, my hair hung down in limp, damp strings. My scalp still flamed, but not as badly; I could bear it. He draped the towel around my shoulders, over my rubber apron, and began again Vaselining my hair.

I could feel him combing, straight back, first the big comb, then the fine-toothed one.

Then he was using a razor, very delicately, on the back of my neck. Then, finally, shaping the sideburns.

5

My first view in the mirror blotted out the hurting. I'd seen some pretty conks, but when it's the first time, on your own head, the transformation, after the lifetime of kinks, is staggering.

The mirror reflected Shorty behind me. We both were grinning and sweating. And on top of my head was this thick, smooth sheen of shining red hair—real red—as straight as any white man's.

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking "white," reflected in the mirror in Shorty's room. I vowed that I'd never again be without a conk, and I never was for many years.

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are "inferior"—and white people "superior"—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look "pretty" by white standards.

Making Meanings

Hair

First Thoughts

1. What do you think is the most important—or powerful—word or phrase in Malcolm’s story? Why?

Shaping Interpretations

2. Why do you think Malcolm feels that conking his hair is a step toward self-degradation?

3. What would you infer about Malcolm’s tone at the end of this selection? (List words or passages that help establish the tone.)

4. In William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, a father gives this advice to his son: “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” What do you think Malcolm would say about this advice?

Connecting with the Text

5. Get together with a small group to talk about the pressures to conform—to be like everyone else—that young people face today. What could happen as a result of these pressures? Be sure to check your Quickwrite notes.

Extending the Text

6. Malcolm talks about behavior that leads toward self-degradation. What, on the other hand, do you think gives people a sense of self-respect or self-esteem?

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