Hadil Ghoneim

HAIRDRESSING

> *"Black, thick like a date-cluster on a heavily laden palm tree. Her curls creep upward to the top of her head"*
> *The Poem of Imru-Ul-Quais*

My mother once boasted to me that in her thirty-five years of marriage to my father, he never once saw her natural hair. I turned my face towards him to see his reaction. He quietly attested to her proud declaration by nodding slowly, but with slightly bewildered eyes. He wore a hesitant smile of a man who'd just learned that he was kindly spared an immense unpleasantness, yet was unsure that he should feel grateful for being so successfully deceived. Mama was lecturing me about hair grooming, which to her meant straightening our frizzy, rough curls into soft, wavy, neat styles using all means possible: thermal tools, chemical formulas, and paid labor. Her unshaken belief is that our type of hair is no less than "a curse," and she wanted me to prepare myself for a lifelong battle that could be won if I consistently employed "fire and iron" to subdue it.

I am not sure Mama was aware she was quoting Lenin. She doesn't really care about socialism, but she does believe in order and control. It was one of those weekend afternoons in my family's living room in Cairo in the early '90s. For Baba, whose law office was void of any urgent cases, it was just like any other day of the week spent with a newspaper in hand, a cigarette in the other, Turkish coffee nearby, and the TV on. But for Mama, it was her day off from teaching math at the school and a busy day at home getting things done. My hair was one of those things, and I wasn't in a hurry to go to my weekly visit to the hairdresser's, the "coiffeur" as we referred to it, even as we spoke in Arabic.

She had already washed and set her own dyed and relaxed hair in rollers, though she had been covering it outside the home since the '80s, following the passing of her younger brother. The sudden reminder of mortality coincided with her discovery of higab as the forgotten duty that she owed to her faith. She never imposed her religious headscarf on me, but she wasn't going to tolerate anything less than respectably kempt hair. When I suggested skipping the hairdresser to watch more TV and try leaving my hair natural for a change, I was quickly defeated by her well aided speech. After all, our modern colonial history was on

her side, and the women on TV were proof. I was a pre-internet teenager and had no

other visual tools to challenge the mainstream idea that my thick, wiry, afro-textured hair was unseemly.

Mama paid for my weekly coiffeur visit. To many, this was a luxury, if not a sign of outrageous spoiledness. But no matter how tight our budget was, Mama would always set aside "coiffeur money" as a necessity on par with essential medical expenses. In fact, Mama referred to the imported chemical hair relaxer she used as "the hair medicine," and she warded off religious criticisms of using the services of male hairdressers by equat
ing coiffeurs with dentists and doctors. She wasn't trying to construct an elaborate analogy; she genuinely pathologized our hair. Mama admits that she has a hair complex. Maybe because she didn't inherit her mother's silky smooth hair, which had been passed on to her from her Turkish mother. Her father had some Tunisian ancestry. Like many Egyptians, our physical features were mixed enough to reflect the schoolbook description of our nation as "enjoying a central position be tween Africa, Asia and Europe" that also caused it to "suffer a series of foreign conquests including Persian, Nubian, Greek, Roman, Arab, Mu ghals and Tatars . . . etc." Perhaps my mother, growing up in the 1950s, felt that her African hair disrupted her otherwise classic Mediterranean features and fairer skin tone that made her look like the film stars of the era. She once consoled me by saying that we should be grateful that "our flaw" was in our hair, rather than in a harder to fix feature like a nose. When she was a little girl, Mama's hair was kept in two neat braids on each side of her head, until she was about thirteen and wanted a less childish look. She started pulling her hair back into one braid so tightly that she developed traction alopecia in less than a year. Little bumps appeared on her scalp, near her temples, and the dermatologist recom mended she stop wearing braids altogether. He suggested that she cut her hair short like her mother. I don't think he went as far as prescribing having it professionally straightened, but that was the only way her hair would look like her mother's. The short "Italian cut" hairstyle was fash ionable back then, and I'm sure Mama rocked it with the confidence of the firstborn, beautiful big sister that she had always been. That wasn't the case for me. Similar to Mama, my trajectory into short hair started as a restorative remedy to a health problem. I was only a third grader

living in Kuwait where my parents were expats, when the Ameri can school nurse gave me a sealed envelope addressed to my parents. As

soon as my mother took out the note, I could tell that I'd brought her some kind of shame. My uncle laughed at the mention of lice—he yelled out the English adjective "lousy" with glee—but Mama's face was full of resolve. That same evening she took me to the salon of her hairdresser, and Sonia cut my hair "a` la garçonne" as they called it. I don't remember crying, or even objecting to my mother's edict. I wasn't too fond of my hair. It was never allowed to go anywhere or do anything beyond the bor ing braid on each side of my head—except on the Eid holiday.

Once a year, my grandmother (Teta) would treat my cousins and I to what we called the "loulou" hairstyle. On the night before Eid, she would bring out a box of long strips of linen, and then she would twist sections of our wet hair using those strips, spiraling and tying them tightly around each twist. I thought this family tradition must have been passed down from ancient Egyptian times, because our hair was bandaged like mum

mies until it dried overnight. We would go to bed holding our twists carefully, and lie down as still as cadavers. On Eid morning, Teta would take out the linen, and, for the holiday, we would have wonderful long spiral curls that were tied at the top but free to sway left and right. Many years later, I discovered that our ringlets weren't uniquely Egyptian. They are known as Victorian rag curls or sausage twists and were popularized in the 1930s by the American child star Shirley Temple.

Not every day was Eid. Surrendering my head daily to my mother's combing, detangling, and braiding with a little application of Brylcreem was never pleasant, and was sometimes tearfully painful, even though my mother tried to bring me joy and the illusion of choice with an assort

ment of colored ribbons that filled an entire comodino drawer. "The big chop" meant freedom from all that, though the school nurse thought it was too drastic a measure and looked sorry for me. But until I reached age fourteen, I didn't care. Either the "a`la garçonne" aspect of short hair unleashed the latent tomboy inside me, or I trumped it up to match my new image.

Perhaps it was only a coincidence that the girl with hair short like a boy's favored high-energy games, and wanted to play in the street like a

boy. I enjoyed conventional "quiet girl" activities too: from dress-up and make-believe tea parties, to reading fairy tales and drawing. Yet I was made to believe that the loud and the wild belonged to the boys' world. So when we moved back to Cairo, and my sixth grade teacher Mrs. So-

heir, called me "a tomboy" in front of the class one day, I embraced it and felt proud for having extra capacities that were not usually associated with girls. The tomboy label became a license to reject the demands that confined girls to being less noisy in school and helping out with house
work at home.

The sixth grade was also the year I was hauled to a coiffeur for the first time, and marked the beginning of decades of thermally straightening and styling my hair. I had gone with Mama to stay with my grandfather for a few weeks because he was ill, and perhaps seeing puberty arrive to me in her old family apartment made her decide that taking me to her former neighborhood coiffeur was an appropriate rite of passage. I didn't mind getting smooth hair, but I didn't want anything fancy that would draw attention to me, and I felt out of place at an establishment that was not quite designed for children as patrons.

That feeling intensified back in my neighborhood, where my mother didn't frequent the coiffeurs, and I walked into their salons alone with no lineage to their clients. It was an overwhelming social test as a twelve year-old, to order a service from adult men and women, to train myself to speak up when I wanted something different, and to not feel mortified when it was time to pay and tip the coiffeur and his assistant (who was like the nurse to the surgeon, handing him dangerous tools and cleaning up bodily discards). I watched as each grown-up lady paid at the desk, then went back to stick a bill in the shirt pocket of the coiffeur, and smaller bills for his helpers. He would nod in acknowledgment and say with the franco-arab salon lingo: "*merci ya madam*" or "*merci ya madmoozeil*."

Hair and nail salons are ubiquitous in Cairo, and in my neighborhood there was an abundance of coiffeurs within walking distance of my home. The long-standing salons were typically run or owned by an old male coiffeur, who would be the one to cut my hair and then give directions to his assistants. They would wash, set my hair in rollers, place me under a bubble dryer, and unroll it for the coiffeur to style it with the iron tongs *el-fer*, which was heated on a live flame lit by a gas

burner. That was the "iron and fire" method that Mama believed in, though she told me to order a *mise en plis* (pronounced mezanblay in Egypt). Being from her generation, he did that automatically, giving me a pouffy, retro look that I never intended or liked very much. But that wasn't the only reason I kept moving from one salon to another.

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One time I saw my old grumpy coiffeur threatening to punish the little girl who worked for him with the hot iron. I was only a few years older than Yasmeen. She pretended to laugh and not care when she was insulted and yelled at, but I had seen her before with red miserable eyes, and wondered if he or his wife had ever executed that threat on her skin for real. I sat there, afraid to show my anger. I rehearsed in my head things I could say in protest, while pretending to read the magazine on my lap. The monster smiled at me, holding up a mirror to show me the back of my hair, and I told him "merci." I slipped out of my chair, paid quickly, and never returned there again.

Salon choices expanded as I grew older, and so did my interest in trendier hairstyles. I found a hair buddy in a college friend who lived in my neighborhood and was my best friend in high school. She started get ting her hair done weekly and learning to drive, so together, we crossed the bridge over the Nile to Khaled's salon in the nearby, younger neigh borhood. Baba watched me once getting ready to go to the new coiffeur and quipped at me with an old Egyptian proverb: "the farthest Sheikh has the most magical of cures." He never had anything to say about my hair except for warning me against bangs, which "would ruin my eye sight." If I asked his opinion, he would call me out for fishing for com pliments, and he didn't give them out anyway. Once he said that he liked any hairstyle that showed my face and didn't hide any part of it. I took it as a compliment.

Khaled was young, fast, and energetic. He always seemed to be jump ing around, even though he was standing in the same spot styling a cli ent's hair, which I used to think was due to his personality, until he told me casually one time that he suffered from hemorrhoids! He stood out among all the coiffeurs I frequented because he gave me the curliest, wildest hairstyles with the curling iron. I've always wanted it to seem natural and effortless, and that required talent. I stopped frequenting Khaled's salon because his new wife, who was also the aesthetician, was too greedy, and I got tired of haggling with her. There was always another coiffeur that was more convenient or more promising of just

the right kind of magic.

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While I grilled my hair every week, the town's biggest hair trend became veiling it in all forms of headscarves. I became a member of the minority of females with exposed hair on the streets, at the university, and among my cousins, who were convinced that covering your hair was how you became a good Muslim. I didn't think that integrity could be so simply defined and acquired so obviously in one little garment. It seemed like an overblown shortcut to something that should be harder to achieve and less visible.

One veiled relative tried to convince me to follow her example. "What is the point?" I asked her. "*Fitna* (temptation)—you should not evoke it," she said. I touched my short, plain, dry hair and smiled in self-depreca tion. "I don't think my hair is a temptation." "Of course it is. According to the *hadith*, everything but your face and hands should be covered." "But lips and eyes are more attractive. It's all they swoon about in love songs!" "That's not your responsibility. If you are wearing the *higab* then you've done your job." "But you're veiled and you wear make-up and attractive fashions. I don't think you want to be unnoticed by men. If I wear the veil, I think I'll be a hypocrite because I'm not ready to enter the convent."

That was one way I defended my resistance to the trend, but I was sel dom asked about my thoughts. I had to learn to withstand being judged as an underperforming Muslim, by both females who became better Muslims instantaneously with a scarf, and males who weren't asked to wear a constant measure of their faith.

Among the minority of unveiled Muslim girls, some were guilt ridden but aspiring to become veiled one day, "*en sha' Allah*," when they finally found the courage to give up their hair and western style clothes. Others didn't care much about religion or people's opinions and rebelled against society's confines. I found myself in even a smaller minority because I did care about faith and my spiritual life, but I wasn't convinced that the headscarf was as crucial as those new sheikhs wanted us to believe. The more they emphasized it and yelled about it on their podiums, the more I got skeptical. I didn't need their interpretations. I embraced the ambiguity of the Quranic verses on the matter of women's appearance

and the absence of hair from mention as properly intentional and relative to circumstance.

At home, I found support for my resistant position. Baba was a

self-proclaimed secular who saw veiling women as a sign of our nation's regression away from modern civilization. He was nostalgic for the times when Cairo women would go to downtown cinemas wearing décolletage, and because I had learned a few things about dependency theory, I told him that his view of modernity was too Eurocentric. Yet I appreciated that no matter where his liberal values came from, at least they made him never interfere in Mama's choice to wear the veil or my choice not to wear it.

It was Mama's support of my position that was surprising, given her own religiosity and observance. Though she rarely agreed with Baba on anything, they were both quite puzzled by the recent "discovery" of the veil as if it were a pillar of the faith. They wondered why their own par ents, who exceeded them in piety and held degrees in Islamic scholarship, never cared about, or even mentioned, veiling women. "We are borrow ing the traditions of the desert from the Gulf countries," they concurred. And in some other instances they would complain "It's the rural migrants invading the city."

Mama changed the style of her veil from an echarpe to a turban. She adhered to wearing long skirts and long sleeves. When we squabbled over my outfits, it was often because they were too plain or casual for her taste. It was Baba's ominous words about the world outside our home that dis turbed me: "Remember that because you are unveiled, you are assumed to be morally compromising. You have to be extra strict and virtuous." It took me many years to dismantle the defenses I built to protect myself from that world and to not care about people's assumptions.

Back at the hair salon, I noticed that Warda, the nail technician, cov ered her hair at the end of her shift before heading out. How did she feel making that switch everyday, and who did she resent more: the hair dresser who wouldn't employ her if she were veiled, or her family and neighborhood who wouldn't tolerate her exposed hair? As I wondered about Warda's free will, she interrupted my thoughts and whispered that she could do my nails at my home for less money, and quickly slipped her cell phone number into my hand. Warda was practical. Her plan was economic independence from both her family and her employer.

I didn't think that middle class girls like me would ever face the kind of coercion that Warda faced, until a new love interest surfaced in my friend Rana's life and our conversations. Rana was, and still is, an attrac-

tive, outgoing, and fun-loving person. She was one of the most daring of my friends: taking risks like traveling alone to Thailand, and unafraid to fall (and fail) in love. She was the only one to take a summer job while we were still in high school. Her hair was a medium brown color, curly, loose, and long. She used Sun-In to give it lighter golden highlights. When we were in high school, Mama thought Rana's hairstyle was too messy and "bushy."

Towards her late twenties, Rana wanted to settle down. She was tired from changing jobs and dealing with noncommittal boyfriends. One day, she announced that she had met somebody new; the most remarkable thing about him was that he lived in the UK. They went quickly from getting to know each other to making future plans. Sometime along the way, they had a standoff: he asked her to either wear the veil or they couldn't continue together. We told her that this was a major red flag but somehow she weathered the storm, because when I attended their en gagement party some weeks after, her hair was gleaming and well-coiffed. I missed her wedding because I had moved to London to study for a graduate degree, but was told that "Rana got married and is now wearing the veil."

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"If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head"
—William Shakespeare

London was a bad hair year for me. My scholarship wasn't going to cover hair salon expenses, and I wasn't going to squander my meager savings from seven years of work on blow-drys. During those years of my profes sional life, my routine fix-up had become even more binding. I wanted a break. Letting my hair go natural and "coiffeur-less" in London was like running around town and going to class in pyjamas. It felt liberating to
be able to get away with it, but also not very attractive. Anytime I had traveled outside of Egypt for more than a week for work or training, I risked the interruption of my coiffeur-given magical hair treatment.

With my "real" hair exposed, I felt like Cinderella after midnight, when her shiny carriage turns back into a raggedy pumpkin. I didn't escape, though. My undone hair was already an escape from my

usual appearance, and as a tourist or an international student, neither my job nor my social status was at stake. I did get less attention from men, which didn't worry me much, because I knew how easy it was to reverse that. Invisibility was a repose.

While some writers have pointed to a "Cinderella Complex"—wom en's fear of independence and their unconscious belief that they need a man to save them—it's less common to reflect on Cinderella's dependence on the fairy godmother's magic wand. I took a blow-dryer, some rollers, and another electric hair device with me to London, remembering how Asya, from *In the Eye of the Sun*, packed a tripod dryer when she left Egypt for England and spent three hours doing her hair every week. In my case, I tried this only twice. The outcome didn't withstand the perennial driz
zle and it was a waste of my precious time-out. Still, I wasn't happy with the way my "natural" hair looked. It was big, dry, and frizzy—not the fun strands of curls that I wished it to be. Most of the time I wrapped half of it in a large jersey headband that I bought from Camden Market after I saw a cool guy with dreadlocks wearing one.

A few years later, a bigger move across the Atlantic with my husband forced me to acquire the skill and the available technology to manage my hair at home. Aided by a series of Japanese, Brazilian, and French straightening formulas to relax my curls, I set aside two hours a week to blow dry and flat iron my own hair. I was at a loss if it happened to be too humid, or in the aftermath of a swim. I bought a lot of hats and sometimes I would wrap my hair in a turban, using a long linen scarf the way some men in rural upper Egypt wear it. I went to fewer hairdressers in the US because it's too expensive to do so weekly, and also because in the university towns that I happened to live in, there were only white hairdressers who didn't know I had "black" hair until they found them selves in the thickets of it.

I started to believe that home is where your coiffeur is. It took me several years before I would have a haircut or a smoothing treatment in America. I noticed that my Chinese friend in California would also only cut or perm her hair when she went back to China on vacations. Just like I did. However, as I felt more settled in, I started asking for stylists who

knew how to do black hair before I made my occasional hair appoint ments. Famous black American women like Oprah and Michelle Obama had heat-styled hair, and others, I learned, wore expensive weaves and

wigs. An Egyptian-American friend who wore her hair naturally curly told me the magic is in the right "product." She had way less hair than mine and she never told me what that product was.

I wasn't going to let potentially harmful chemicals seep through my body when I was pregnant and later nursing my baby daughter, so I avoided hair products. But when my daughter was two, and the weather was warm enough in Cambridge to go out with wet hair, I started my second attempt at natural hair. I was inspired by the rebellion in Egypt which I was following closely on Facebook. It seemed to me that all the longstanding fixtures of life over there were changing, and not just the regime. I bought a product on Amazon after reading tens of reviews by a virtual community of users, slathered it on wet hair almost every day for a few weeks before I decided it wasn't practical, or great looking.

Resorting back to my familiar thermal and relaxing methods, I felt de feated but less guilty. My white American friend blow dried her straight hair into even straighter hair every day without feeling any shame about it. Why did I feel less free doing the same thing? Why did I feel like an imposter and that my hair was "artificial"? Why should I feel that I am betraying something bigger? My hair doesn't have to be a slogan against anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim bigotry, or colonialism. I don't have to carry Islam, Fanon, Edward Said, or the Arab Spring on my head. All I cared about at that point as a busy mom was efficiency—how to minimize the time, energy, and expenditure that my hair requires to be presentable, so I can direct those resources to other things that are more important or more enjoyable.

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Meanwhile, while I was doing those other things, the hair on my baby daughter's head grew into soft, lovely curls. It got thicker every year, but it wasn't dry or coarse like mine, and her ringlets were well defined. When Mama video calls me from Cairo, the first thing she asks is to see her granddaughter's hair. She has seen me post pictures of her with untidy *mankoosh* hair and tells me that I need to tie it back or to the sides with headbands, braids, buns, or pigtails. Sometimes I do, as I can't resist

buying her cute hair accessories, but most of the time I let her curls loose. I try hard not to pass to her the hair complex, despite the voices in my

head. I also make sure her hair is kept away from her eyes, though my father passed long before she was born.

My old friend—my college coiffeur buddy—came to the US for a fel lowship. She visited me for a weekend during which her daughters called her from Cairo in the middle of the night because of multiple hair crises, one involving chewing gum. She gave each of them detailed instructions about their haircare over many phone calls which reminded me of a line I had recently read by the orphaned narrator in *The Secret Life of Bees*, "you can tell which girls lack mothers by the look of their hair."

Lice happened in my daughter's kindergarten class in Michigan and we spent a year at war with the parasites before full eradication. No hair was sacrificed, and no chemical warfare was allowed. I studied the life cycle of the louse; consulted moms and nurses; and only came through after hundreds of nitpicking sessions during which we bonded like we were monkey families. When we arrived at Mama's door during winter break carrying a few leftovers in our hair, she panicked much less than I had expected. She led the daily nitpicking huddles with a renewed sense of mission, and she slayed the most.

Then last year, when I was visiting Cairo again, I met Rana. Her bil lowing hair was back in full view and she was a newlywed. This time to a clean-shaven, several-years-younger European, who is very kind to her children from the first husband. Two other friends had unveiled too, as did one of my cousins. I spent the rest of my vacation near the beach with another cousin, who still wears her veil as devoutly as ever - which didn't hinder her from enjoying the sea. Her fourteen-year-old daughter braided my wiry hair in a wonderful, intricate style that she had learned from YouTube. She herself has thick, long curly hair that she manages very well on her own, unlike me when I was her age.

Back in Michigan, another friend convinced her observant husband to understand her decision to take off the veil that she had chosen to wear before they'd met fifteen years ago. Her curly bronze hair came out to a si lent, even tearful shock from "the community" and to louder disapproval from her mother back in Egypt. She remains friendly with everyone, and cooks meat for her family despite becoming a vegan working mom for the first time in her life. She told me she feels simple

and free, like the girl she was back in college. I didn't know her then, but I could see the '90s

vibe clearly in her "wash and go" hair. I tried to wash and go my hair the following weekend and failed.

I started to notice more and more friends reverting to natural hair, posting pictures of their curls victoriously on Facebook, and proselytizing the "method' and their "routine." The fervor of the self-appointed hair coaches was to me as off-putting as "the call to the veil" of my youth. Still, I joined their Facebook groups out of curiosity, and felt sorry for the time and money that members were spending on their "addiction," as one group named itself.

Even though I had refused to politicize my own hair, I could see the shadow of Egypt's January short lived revolution continue to breathe in all these hair stories.

When a friend praised my daughter's curls and asked me what her routine was. I realized as I answered her slowly that I have somehow along the way arrived at a curly hair care routine for my daughter that is working pretty well. After that, all I could see was natural curly hair. It was the first thing I noticed in magazines, on screens, and on the streets. They came in all different shapes and textures and they all looked fun and appealing. My own straightened hair seemed nothing but boring to me. I wanted to join the fun, the movement. I wanted to try again, and decided to seek professional help this time: a hair doctor, a sheikh or magician, to jumpstart my transition.

I found an unconventional one in a nearby town, a salon founded by a woman who grew up with a challenging Jewish fro and then decided to make natural products for thick curly hair. My stylist was a young black woman in braids who, like an attentive physician, asked me many questions before diagnosing, cutting, cleaning, irrigating, and sealing my newly separated strands of hair. She advised me on maintenance and I gratefully paid a hefty price for the treatment and the potions she sold me.

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"And her insane hair like a gypsy travels the whole world."
—Nizar Qabbani

I couldn't contain my ecstatic smiles as I drove home with a big shiny bush of hair surrounding my face like a black halo. I couldn't wait to show my daughter, who never quite understood why I gushed over her curls, yet straightened mine all the time. "I like it," she said. "I like how happy you look," said her father. I posted a picture on Facebook and was congratulated as if I were a new convert. Mama, who likes any picture I post, ignored it.

We talked on the phone. I teased her and laughed and told her all the things that I've learned about caring for our dry, curly hair. She wasn't im pressed and asked me forbiddingly if I was coming to Egypt for summer vacation in that hairstyle. "We are not like Amreeka" she said echoing the military government's blanket objection to demands for things like free speech and human rights. Yet, the next day, she sent me a picture of a young Egyptian actress wearing her big natural hair, saying this shape without the side parting would look better on me. I smiled hard inside.

My lazy teenage self wished for hair that didn't require all that pro cessing every week. I thought I was more of a simple, natural, wash and go person. It turned out from the tutorials I've watched on YouTube that "wash and go" is a misnomer, and that given all the manipulation and products involved in the grooming process of that curly look, the word "natural" is not very accurate. I still spend hours every week setting and twisting my hair and then drying and untwisting it. A method that resembles Teta's Eid hairstyles of my childhood, minus the linen rags. Mama was probably right in that respect. Even if the desired look is a carefree one, I still have to work hard and attempt to control it. Ancient Egyptians carefully groomed and braided their thick curly hair depicted, or shaved their heads and wore shapely wigs instead. The difference be

tween me and Mama now, is that I don't see my special hair texture as

"flawed" anymore. I'm not fighting it, trying to subdue and transform it. I was caged by the idea that I had no choice but to straighten my hair. To me, feeling free isn't the form of my hair or whether or not it is covered. It is realizing that there are many different ways to beauty, many different ways to God, and that I can try some. As for that confidence I gained from developing an ability for self-production, it is tempered

everyday by a frizzy front, a flattened back, or mysterious upshoots of wayward strands. I found that wearing imperfection is both an expression of modest humanity and proud individuality. Hairdressers like to stress the individuality with a scientific claim that "no two people have the same hair". Islamic artists used to make deliberate mistakes in their work to stress their humility and the belief that only God is perfect.

Soon I will be visiting Mama in Egypt and I won't avoid the hair talk with her, but I will do everything to avoid talking politics. She favors the current military rule because she thinks it provides order, and that it's either that or the chaos and destruction of neighboring countries. I don't think these are the only choices. I'm no longer afraid of change even if it's messy and requires hard work because taking some control and feeling a little more free is worth it. The "fire and iron" method is short-lived. Any hairdresser will tell you that it leads to split ends and vulnerable, brittle, damaged hair that becomes impossible to grow long and healthy. Even Mama would agree to that.