“Joojo, you’re a pastor’s child. Why are you doing this?”

The question hung in the air, as my grandma stared at me with pain in her eyes. “Doing what?” I asked, feigning ignorance. I knew why she was alarmed. I knew the source of her discomfort. I knew what I’d done. For much of my life up to that point, my appearance had been controlled. My image had been carefully managed to portray responsibility, acceptability and conformity. And nowhere was that more apparent than my hair.

But now, that had all changed.

My grandmother’s shock was the immediate aftermath. Because instead of my signature tapered fade and high-top, I’d come home with my hair braided into two-strand twists. I left home corporate and came back casual. Grandma’s reaction was immediate and visceral. “This is unacceptable. Joojo, no.”

Even though her rejection stung, I could empathize with how she felt. Because under the tsunami of her disapproval lay an undercurrent of social conditioning more than 8 decades in the making. My grandma grew up old-school. She became a woman in an era before Ghana was even a country. An era when all the major institutions were owned by British colonizers. An era when black people aspiring to the few desk jobs available needed to conform - in their appearance and otherwise. Essentially, to get ahead, you needed to be One of the Good Ones™.

So it’s no surprise that to my grandma, changing my hair = destroying my future.

Now imagine a whole nation raised by grandmothers like mine. A nation obsessed with pretentious propriety and proximity to whiteness. That’s Ghana. The obsession starts early. From primary school until I graduated high school, my colleagues and I were forbidden to wear our hair long or grow a beard. And it was worse for the young girls, whose coils were permed, braided into cornrows or shaved short. Now these restrictions would be repressive enough on their own, but there was still a coup de grace - they didn’t apply to the white kids or our lighter-skinned colleagues. Nobody explicitly said so, but they never got penalised for their hair no matter how long or intricate it got. The school’s silence sent a loud message:

Your coily, kinky, *nappy* black hair is inferior. Substandard. Less than.

I attended school in Ghana from the day I left my diapers till the day I got my diploma, so it was little surprise that I internalised its unspoken ethos. Even after I left for college in the US, I hardly changed my hair, because it simply did not register to me that I could. Instead, I was content to grow a baby goatee, because I’d always wanted a beard. Nevertheless, college surrounded me with a community of people who expressed themselves in a plethora of authentic ways, including through their hair. Although I wouldn’t act on it then, that experience planted a seed in my subconscious.

Eventually, college ended and the real world beckoned. I landed a job at a prestigious consulting firm back in Ghana. But before I could even set foot in the door, my father strongly advised me to shave my beard. I walked in on my first day sporting five o’clock shadow, feeling like a shadow of myself. The seed got buried ever deeper. My next two years were

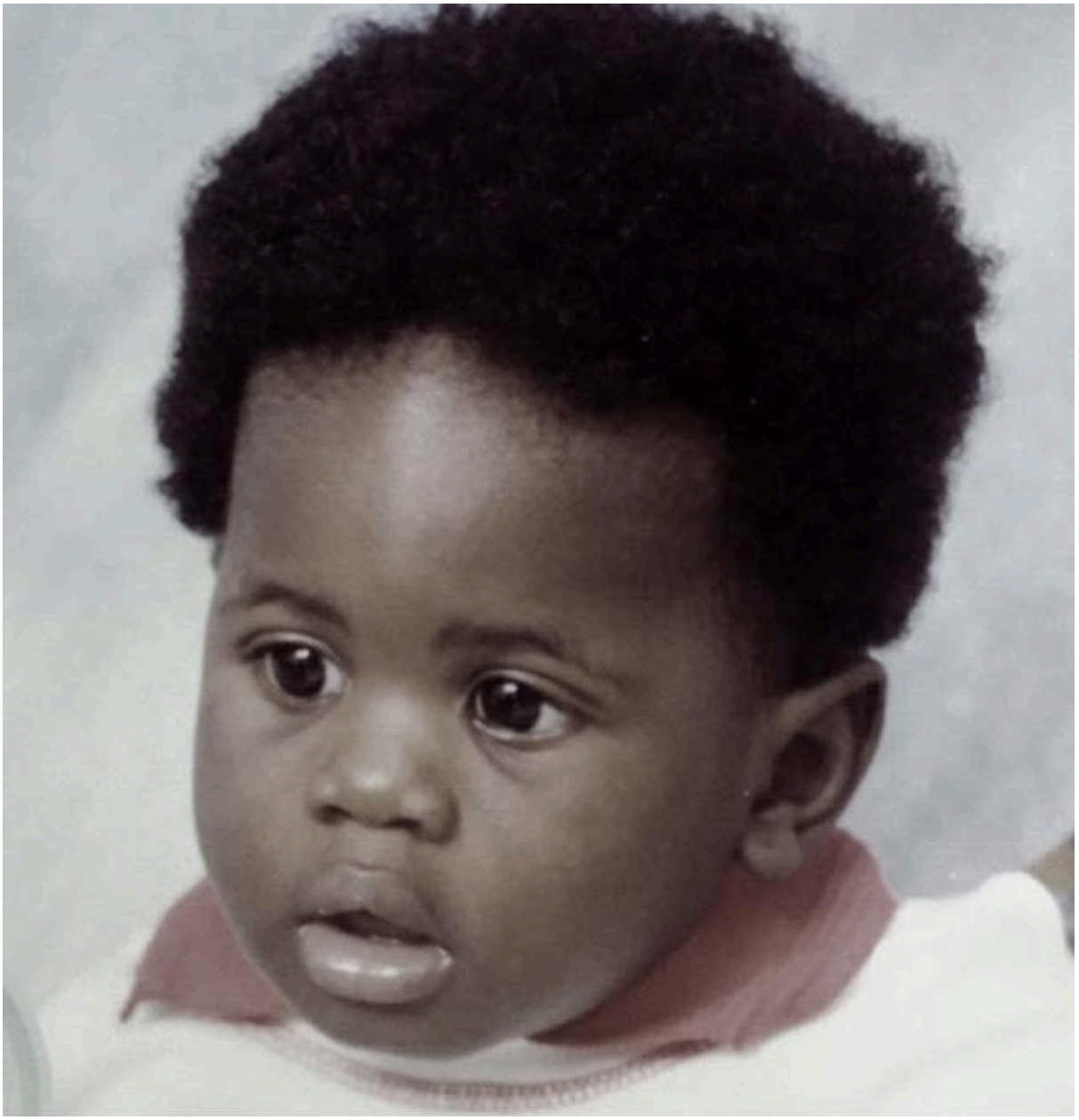
spent in corporate conformity, but eventually, the pretense and stuffiness of the culture started to chafe at me. I resented sitting at my desk after my tasks were complete, simply because the partner hadn't left and we had to keep up appearances. I resented gritting my teeth while managers blamed us for their mistakes. I resented wearing a suit and tie in 97 degree heat. After two years, my necktie had become a noose.

But COVID helped me breathe again. And with each breath, the seed planted in college grew a little bit bigger. You see, COVID meant working from home, and that meant no more suits, no more ties, and no more barbers. Lockdown forced me to grow out my hair. For the first time, I dared to wonder what else my curls could be, beyond a humble afro. At first, I pushed down my wonderings, but the more I suppressed them, the more they tugged at my mind.

So I started indulging them in secret. My girlfriend would twist my hair in her apartment and take it down before I went home. I revelled in those moments of freedom and creativity, short-lived as they were. But soon it wasn't enough to experiment in the shadows. It wasn't enough for the corporate noose to be loose enough to breathe. I needed to take it off once and for all. So I did. I quit my job. After three years of steady growth underground, the seed finally broke through and basked in the sunshine. Because I realised then what I hadn't quite figured out in college - I deserve the freedom to express myself.

My hair is freedom.

Whether I'm teasing out my curls with my massive magenta comb or sitting at my lover's feet as she twists my afro, doing my hair reminds me that my life is mine alone. A few years ago, my parents shared a baby picture I'd never seen for my birthday. As I stared at myself frozen in time, I was transfixed by the beautiful ringlets that framed my chubby face. That photo made me nostalgic, but it also broke my heart. Because it was taken long before that chubby baby would have his beautiful black clouds shaved and come crashing down to earth. Before he was taught to hate his coils and see them as lesser. Before he would lose his right to choose.



These days, the people in my life have largely accepted my constant hair experiments. Now, it takes my grandmother a few days to even notice a new haircut. The other day, she stared at me after I came from the salon and said, “you always had beautiful hair as a child.” It may not seem like much, but in her own way, that’s progress. My hair isn’t the only thing growing in our family.