

In the eleventh grade, in Mrs. Allister's homeroom, I reached out and touched my classmate's afro. I was enamored with her brightly oiled curls, all a mix of her natural browns and bottle-borne L'Oreal Creamy Caramel Highlights. She smelled so tropical and warm on that chilly October morning: coconut oil, beachy hair spray, something citrusy and sunny. Her wild curls juxtaposed in their containment, I could not resist touching them, testing their bounce. She was my friend, and she was beautiful. She immediately smacked my hand down. Hard.

It was wrong of Mrs. Allister to make her apologize to me. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I had been the one to cross the line. When my friend refused, she was given detention for insubordination. She would not apologize, she said. At this point, I was pleading with the teacher to take back the punitive discipline.

Mrs. Allister told me to quit being silly.

It wasn't until years later, in a class that wasn't designed to make the brutal history of the world palatable, that I learned the extent of how American slaves' autonomy was defiled, was desecrated. When I was growing up in Bridgeton, natural hair was a common sight to me: box braids, twist outs, afros. I didn't know that the professional world scrutinized and condescended the natural growth of *black hair*, that a person could get fired (if hired at all) for simply wearing their hair as it naturally grows. I didn't realize there was such an internal dichotomy within POC communities: hair, and then *good hair*. I didn't realize the symbolism of autonomy, of self empowerment, of authenticity that comes with growing out natural hair. And honestly, I didn't realize how much time and attention is spent on maintaining healthy, natural hair until she patiently explained it to me later. I didn't realize POC hair could be such a point of contention, yet there I was literally sticking my hand in it.

Kiara spent her afternoon in detention. I touched her hair, and she got punished. Not even my white tears could change the teacher's mind on that one. Sure, my attention was appreciative, but she didn't appreciate my attention.

And that is perfectly OK.

We quickly reconciled as friends, but it still remains: I touched her hair, and she got punished. How is *that* OK? What does that say, when we punish the person who had their boundaries crossed? Why was it OK for me to touch her hair, unsolicited and unwanted, but it was not OK for her to stop me?

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