

Bearing Witness: Not So Crazy in Alabama

CHAPTER EXCERPT

CHAPTER EIGHT THE ROOT OF IT ALL: A HAIR ABOVE THE REST

She looked at me and paused.

"You don't look like yourself," she said as we walked down the stairs and out of the building.

I was meeting my friend Lila for lunch one day at her state job in a bland rectangular building on a corner in downtown Montgomery. We were on our way to grab a bite to eat – a bite was all that I could have eaten that day since I was recovering from the stomach flu.

I know. Too much information.

Lila is a special person. I really mean that. She is from Rome and has a glorious melodious accent. Every vowel is wonderfully elongated. She makes saying, "Hello" sound...well...truly fabulous.

We met in the world of books at Barnes and Noble where she also works.

She also works in the world of municipal government and just took a hiatus from her work in the world of theater. She has so many jobs, she would put a Jamaican to shame.

No one can accuse Lila of not being straightforward. So when she made that comment, I immediately took it to heart.

I knew what she was talking about. She had only seen me at my most casual best – bandanna tied around my head like a kerchief, sweat pants and sweat shirts, sneakers or sandals.

Here I was, wearing a long skirt, well past my ankles, a nice maroon sweater zipped up the front with a high collar, and a WIG.

Yes, it was a reddish brown mop of a thing that I had tried hopelessly to style into something resembling modern but a long way from "hip."

I hated that wig and it knew it. Never, never did it look quite right. And adding insult to injury, it made me look OLDER.

But that wig was a part of my formal, public persona. I wore it during openings for the cultural institution and even in the classroom. But as soon as those occasions were over and I went home and stepped across the threshold, I snatched that thing off and flung it on the nearest piece of furniture.

Feeling sorry for the ugly thing, I always went to retrieve it and placed it on the white Styrofoam head on my dresser. It's so weird having a disembodied head on one's dresser with no eyes to see, no ears to hear, and no mouth to protest. Note to self: Idea for horror flick – attack of the killer wigs with their stands as accomplices.

When I came to town, I was completely natural. Hair braided. Not some expensive fancy braids that took several hours. No, I did it myself thank you. One minor problem: I don't have the gift for doing hair. Some people are just born with a bottle of gel in one hand and a styling comb in the other. My braids always turned out twisted and uneven no matter how hard I tried. And I can't make a straight part to save my life.

Those braids weren't pretty, but they were me.

But I was in Alabama, and I knew that this conservative's hairstyle was far too radical.

So, I decided to get my hair straightened. I felt I had to strike a compromise – yes, I would straighten my hair but not with chemicals. It would be with that dreaded hot comb.

Oh, the hot comb and I go way back. To the days when I used to sit between my mother's leg on that red wooden stool in our Harlem kitchen. I'd watch that hot comb with the thin metal gold teeth and wooden handle heat up on the gas stove, the smell of burning hair and grease filling my nostrils. My mother struggled as she parted my thick, coarse black hair into manageable sections and applied grease – some castor oily, foul-smelling thick stuff – to each area.

When the comb achieved the right temperature – she'd checked it by tapping her fingers gingerly and rapidly against the teeth's edge – she'd then comb through my hair with a hard tug from the root to the very end. I could feel the heat against my scalp.

It was not a gentle process, for my hair did not straighten willingly. A lot of hard comb-throughs with the instrument of torture left my hair the desired texture – bone straight and stringy.

My head was sore for days afterward. By the time I recovered, the process was set to begin again.

They say when you mess with fire there is a good chance you will get burned. And I did, many times. The comb nicked my temple, ears, and the nape of my neck, leaving burns and scabs all over my little head.

My mother didn't start straightening my hair until after a trip "home" to Montgomery when, at the suggestion of some idle-brained relative, who looked at my thick locks and found them distasteful, did she begin to apply the torturous process on young me.

So here I was, at the place where it all began. I was getting my hair pressed, the formal name for the hot comb treatment. Damn the circle of life.

I was never satisfied. It was too straight. And like in days past, it hurt like hell. My once-thick, healthy hair began to thin – falling out from the root, breaking from the ends.

I tried one hair dresser after another. Each one looked at my hair and agreed to do it.

“No problem,” they’d say.

That was until the hair dressers washed it and it went back to its natural, happier, nappier state. Although I had lost quite a few strands, my hair was still very thick. The once quoted price of twenty-five dollars was always doubled when all was said and done. The reason, “I didn’t know you had so much hair.”

The money thing was only the half of it. It was the caustic backhanded insults and the lack of love for us nappy-headed sisters that really got to me.

While sitting in yet another salon, I heard a beautician refer to unpressed, unprocessed, unaltered hair as “off-the-boat hair.”

Sometimes I can be quite the literalist and metaphors seem to elude me, but I got that one. Oh boy and how. The boat to which she was referring was a slave ship.

Too angry to protest. Too scared to, too. Would you open your trap if someone were standing over you, blazing hot comb in hand with the ability to render you completely bald or worse? No, the risk was far too great. So I kept my mouth shut, knowing that she was referring to the likes of me with my Africanesque locks.

And there I was getting my hair straightened to conform to a society that has yet to embrace the concept of being black and proud.

Needless to say, I did not return.

Always willing to give it just one more try, I decided to go to yet another salon. The place came highly recommended from a friend of one of my students.

Why not? I thought. Maybe this time it will be better. That’s me, forever the optimist.

So, I went to the other side of town, traveled the wrong way down a one-way street, and navigated my car around potholes that could swallow the biggest supertanker SUV.

Finally, I found it. It turned out to be a powder-blue cinderblock house resembling some odd fairy tale castle. Oh yeah, it was a fairy tale all right, complete with a gruff woman and her able-bodied assistant ready to sock it to poor, innocent me.

