

CHAPTER 1



Chemicals

Growing up, my hair was referred to as “nappy” and “peezy”. This came from adults and kids. It was nothing to be proud of back then. Those were terms to surely be teased about. On some occasions, the adults would use the term “coarse”. That didn’t sound too bad to me.

Chemicals were introduced to my hair at a very young age. I want to say probably at age five. The first chemical was called the Jheri Curl. The Jheri Curl was popular in the 1980s and that’s exactly when I got the chemical placed in my hair. It wasn’t done in a salon, but by a lady in the neighborhood at her home. Yes, I said at her home. I believe my mother wanted to try this option to help manage my hair care. In other words, make it easier to comb and help it to grow. Needless to say, that Jheri Curl didn’t last long. Why? I’m not exactly sure.

Without chemicals, my hair could be described as tough. Since the Jheri Curl was unsuccessful, the next thing was the relaxer. The purpose of the relaxer is to eliminate the kinks in your hair. The chemicals would make your hair straight by altering your natural curl pattern. By getting a relaxer, it was intended to make your hair easier to comb. When it comes to beauty, the relaxer's purpose is to make your hair more European-like. The relaxer was also interchangeably called a perm. Trust me, I had every relaxer that was available. Let me go down the list. The relaxers were: Dark N Lovely, Soft & Beautiful, Precise, Optimum, Just For Me, TCB, PCJ, and Ultra Sheen. It's probably more than that. I just can't recall. Then there was also the popular kiddie kit. It was deemed not as strong as a chemical, but suitable for children. However, every relaxer purchased for me was labeled, super, coarse, or extra course.

The relaxers that I just mentioned were accessible via the shelves of emporiums, such as Walmart, Kmart, Family Dollar, and beauty supply stores. The relaxers came in a small square or rectangular box with a pretty little Black girl or woman on the outside. Inside the box was a round plastic container filled with a white cream, which is the actual relaxer. The relaxer is sometimes referred to as "creamy crack". It's a term coined by comedian, Chris Rock, in his movie, *Good Hair*. Other essential items were in the box too. There were at least two small bottles filled with shampoo and neutralizer, a chemical-filled packet to mix inside the creamy crack, a small wooden stick in the shape of a tongue depressor or a fat popsicle stick, and thin plastic gloves. Now that I think about it, this was indeed a science project. My mom would buy them and mix the creams and chemicals herself and apply it to my hair.

Instructions were included with the relaxer as well. I recall my mother parting my hair with the comb into four sections starting

from ear to ear and my forehead to the nape of my neck. Then the relaxer would be applied to the roots of my thick hair. If I'm not mistaken, the relaxer would stay on my hair for about 30 minutes. The next step was rinsing the hair to remove the relaxer. Afterwards, the hair would be shampooed. If the neutralizing shampoo turned pink after the relaxer was rinsed out, that was an indication of the relaxer still being present. Sometimes, this took several rounds shampooing to ensure all of the relaxer was completely out of the hair. Once the shampoo turned white, you were good to go. Finally, it was time for the conditioner application. Depending upon the brand, it was either a leave-in or conditioner requiring a rinse after a few minutes.

Nothing is relaxing about the relaxer. Frequently, I'd experience burning sensations on my scalp. Again, the goal was to keep the relaxer on my hair for 30 minutes. Often times the burning would become unbearable. I can remember squirming in the kitchen chair because the relaxer felt so hot on my head. You'd want the relaxer to stay on your hair so the relaxer would "take". In other words, if the relaxer "took", then you have achieved success by obtaining straight, non-kinky hair. There were interventions implemented to help me keep the relaxer applied for 30 minutes. Cooling methods included fanning my head, applying cold water, or hair spray to the burning areas. I'd get words of encouragement as if I were running a marathon like, "just a little longer" and "you're almost done." Distraction by watching television was used too. If the interventions failed, the relaxer would be rinsed out to provide relief.

Although these were actual chemicals on the hair, sometimes the relaxer would accidentally get on the skin of my forehead, neck, and ears. Eventually, the relaxer would damage the skin and scabs would soon form. The break in skin wasn't very noticeable. It

depended upon how my hair was styled. There were times when I'd see the "white meat" that comedian, Bernie Mac, used to reference.

There were rare occasions in which I went to a hairdresser, also known as a beautician or cosmetologist. The hairdressers had their own relaxers that they used. I'm not sure of those names. The hairdressers recommended that relaxers be applied every six weeks. However, those relaxers weren't very effective either. My hair wasn't silky smooth and straight for very long.

Why were they not effective? I'm going to say it's because harsh chemicals such as relaxers don't belong on your hair. I already mentioned that the relaxer burns your scalp, it can cause skin irritation, and your hair can be damaged or even fall out. Do ya'll remember the episode on the television show, *Martin*, when Gina was in charge of doing Myra's relaxer? I haven't seen or known anyone's hair to fall out exactly like that, but anything is possible.

I believe wholeheartedly that relaxers contribute to uterine fibroids and reproductive issues. For those unfamiliar with the term uterine fibroid, it's a non-cancerous tumor located inside or around the uterus. Women can have several at a time. Trust me on this. Doctors don't know exactly why uterine fibroids develop. It could be related to hormones, hereditary factors, etc. Many Black women develop them. White women get them too, but at a much lower rate. What's one thing that most Black women have in common? The answer is relaxers. Now, that has been my own personal theory. However, a study completed by the [*American Journal of Epidemiology*](#) in 2012, concluded there is in fact a correlation between uterine fibroids and relaxers.

CHAPTER 2



Desire for Long Pretty Hair

As a kid, my hair was really short. There were a few little girls in the neighborhood with really long, thick hair that fell down their backs. However, there were no girls or no one in my family who had extremely long hair. My mom's hair was short, and her mother's hair was short too, so I was comfortable with my hair being short.

I do recall in first grade having a desire for long hair, but I wasn't wishing on a star or anything like that. Plenty of girls in my class didn't have long hair. There may have been one or two who did. My best friend's hair at the time was even short. It was other adults' perceptions that triggered me.

The first graders at my school were participating in a *Cinderella* stage play that was held at the school. The roles were dispersed and somehow I was selected as the moderator. At six years old I didn't