

Let Your Hair Down – A Reflection on 3 Generations of Women

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My grandmother's hair flowed down past her waist. Every morning until she turned fourteen, she combed it neatly into two tight braids thicker than the size of her wrists and set off for school. Upon graduating freshman year of high school, her place of learning shifted abruptly from school to the kitchen, and she traded two braids for one. At age twenty-one, my grandmother's hair glistened in a bun under the unforgiving Madras sun as she left for the market at five in the morning, and it shone in a braid entwined with flowers as she prayed in the temple and cooked for my grandfather. In braids, her hair stayed for the next forty years, dancing only between the kitchen and the temple – the product of a society that forbade her from letting her hair down.

My mother's hair, once just as long as my grandmother's, has a different story. Until she reached the age of seventeen, my grandmother patiently combed my mother's hair into two tight braids. Entwined with red ribbons, it radiated in the sunlight as she bicycled to school. Upon graduating her senior year of high school, she left her hometown for university. There she combed her own hair into one braid. Fast-forward five years: my mother, age twenty-two, adorned her braid with flowers at the temple on her wedding day. Eight years later, she and my older sister landed on the coast of Santa Clara, California, and, for the first time, saw girls with their hair down.

My hair is shorter than my mother's. It goes down only a little past the middle of my back. Until I reached the age of seven, my mother, sometimes my grandmother, combed my hair firmly into two tight braids. My hair shimmered under the American sun as I wolfed down my breakfast and sat on the bus to school. It got tangled as I somersaulted down the hill on the playground. It got drenched in chlorine when I went for a swim, and it danced from side to side as I ran. Upon graduating third grade, I was old enough to take care of my own hair. I wore it in a ponytail on some days and in a clip on others, sometimes in a bun, sometimes in a braid: I had my choice. I could even let my hair down.

Hair – an aspect of the female being that tells a story to those keen enough to listen. The American girl – she can let down her hair. She can choose her role. She can be a politician in a ponytail, an artist in cornrows, a lawyer in a bun, a model with an Afro, or a banker in a braid – not just a wife and a mother with their hair tied. She can be determined, opinionated, stubborn, defiant, and rebellious – not just calm and submissive. She can go where she wants to go, see what she wants to see, and live how she wants to live: the American girl. My grandmother was not an American girl, and neither was my mother. Yet, here I stand, an American girl, with an infinite amount of possibilities surrounding me, wearing my hair down with pride.