

# wind



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JUDY BELK | MISBEHAVIN' HAIR

On a Saturday night, Naomi sat on a low stool in the kitchen, her head squeezed tightly between her mother's strong legs. The room was filled with the smells of collards as Mrs. Jackson got an early start preparing Sunday's dinner.

Naomi was expected to sit perfectly still, holding a jar of Vaseline within easy reach of her mother's large hard-working hands. She brushed Naomi's hair with such vigor that with every stroke, the bristles scratched her forehead, ears, and neck.

"Mama, stop. . . You're hurting me," Naomi pleaded.

"Girl, be still. Nobody can be this tender-headed. Your hair is as hard as steel wool."

Once the brushing was over, she parted Naomi's hair in four equal sections, rubbed Vaseline on the scalp between each of them, and then came the worst part: the plaiting. As if getting ready for battle, her mother would squeeze her knees even tighter around Naomi's head and pull it back so far she could count every crack in the kitchen ceiling. The end result: four tightly woven plaits smoothed down with an ample supply of Vaseline. The expectation was that with daily brushing, a little Vaseline to smooth down the edges, and luck with the weather—no rain or humidity—her hair would stay in place until Wednesday, when the entire ritual would be repeated. As Naomi got older, her mother had added a hot comb to her arsenal. Once a month, Naomi's hair was washed and hot pressed. As the steaming comb made contact, Naomi's Vaseline-laden hair would sizzle like uncooked floured chicken hitting a frying pan full of hot grease. Oh, how Naomi hated Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Vaseline.

There's one thing all little black girls figure out sooner or later. It's whether they've been blessed or cursed with "good" or "bad" hair.

Naomi's day of reckoning came in 1956, the summer before she started first grade. A cool rain was bringing long overdue relief to a hot humid Virginia day. She and her mother were visiting Grandma Mazzie, which provided Naomi the perfect setting to show off her jump-roping



skills to her stuck-up uncoordinated cousins. She was well on her way to breaking her personal double-dutch record of five-and-a-half jumps when suddenly her mama appeared at the front door. She didn't look too happy.

"Girl, get your butt in this house and outta that rain. You must think you got good hair or something."

Later that night, Naomi stood in front of the mirror carefully examining every strand of her hair. She figured if her hair wasn't good, it must be bad. Perhaps if she looked long and hard enough, she could locate the misbehavin' part and get rid of it with a swift jerk of the hand.

She soon learned it wasn't that easy. Yet her rebellious hair proved no match for Mrs. Jackson, who was determined to do everything she could to make it act and look "good," especially after Naomi started school.

Her father had walked out on her mother two months before Naomi was born. Although she had never even seen a photograph of him, over the years—mainly through the Saturday and Wednesday night hair rituals—a picture began to emerge. As her mother brushed and scolded, she reminded Naomi she had inherited her father's height, stubbornness, laziness, his dark skin, and the "nappiest head of hair this side of kingdom come." It was as if that hair served as a painful and constant reminder that she had failed in both marriage and in endowing her only daughter with the legacy that had been the pride and joy of the Jackson women for generations: light skin and long, straight, "good" hair.

The Jackson women were admired and envied throughout the local colored community for their good looks and particularly for their good hair. Naomi had even overheard Grandma Mazzie and some of the other grown-ups whispering about a distant Jackson relative who "passed" for white. Well, thanks to her phantom daddy, Naomi's birth had derailed the Jackson legacy.

The family tried to make the best of it even as Naomi's hair got nappier and her skin darker with each passing year. One Sunday after everyone had finished dinner and drunk too many gin-and-tonics, her great aunt Sister Mae, who was the lightest and the most "color-struck" in the family, articulated what everyone else was thinking.

"We just gotta accept fact is fact. Naomi Jean ain't going get any lighter. Her hair ain't going get any straighter. It could be worst. She could be ugly. For someone so dark-skinned, she ain't half-bad looking."

Still, Naomi paid the price every Wednesday and Saturday night, when her mother, selecting a brush as her weapon of choice, attacked her hair as if she could brush out the pain and hurt left behind by a no-good man.

One of the lowest points of her childhood came after Naomi was invited by her seventh-grade math teacher, Mr. Yeager, to join the swim team he was coaching.

She just cracked up when he first asked. The closest she had come to swimming was at the community center wading pool on the colored side of town. On really hot days her mother would let her join her cousins at the pool. While they splashed around carefree and bareheaded, Naomi, who was forbidden to put her head under water, was outfitted with a plastic bag topped by an oversized black-and-white polka-dot shower cap.

Mr. Yeager said he didn't care if Naomi didn't know how to swim. He could tell from the way she was built that she had the makings of a strong competitive swimmer. He extended an open invitation for Naomi to stop by the pool to see the team in practice. After a week of stalling, she got up enough nerve to show up. From high in the bleachers where she was sitting, the swimmers doing practice laps made it look so easy and beautiful. And Mr. Yeager was actually encouraging, entirely different from the way he was in math class, where he could be impatient and, at times, abrasive.

She sat for almost an hour, mesmerized by the rhythm and the strength of the swimmers. She imagined herself in the water, unafraid and unburdened, her body moving with grace and purpose. She wondered if swimmers could hear under water. She hoped not. She relished the thought of solitude.

Mr. Yeager's shrill whistle signaling the end of practice brought her back. Maybe he was right, maybe Naomi Jean Jackson could be a swimmer. But how would she ever get her mother's approval?

Her first tactic was pure avoidance. Later that evening she buried the permission slip with a pile of other school forms needing her mother's signature. She left the stack on the dining room table, hoping her mother wouldn't notice the form stamped with large black bold letters, "SWIM TEAM—PARENTAL CONSENT FORM."



She was hiding out in her room pretending to study when her mother came in and handed her all of the forms signed—except the one for the swim team.

"Naomi, what's all this about joining a swim team? How are you going to join a swim team, girl, when you don't even know how to swim?"

"But, mama, Mr. Yeager said I don't need to know how to swim. He'll teach me. He said that I have the perfect body type to be a competitive swimmer."

She regretted the words the moment she said them.

"Your body! What the hell does this Mr. Yeager know about your body? Who is he, anyway?"

Naomi produced the biggest sigh she could muster. "Oh, mama, Mr. Yeager is my math teacher."

By this time, her mother was sitting on the bed with her arms folded. Not a good sign.

"Oh, and would this be the same Mr. Yeager who gave you a C-minus in math on your last report card? And don't even think of giving me that look, young lady. My suggestion is that if Mr. Yeager can teach you, someone who's never been in more than four feet of water in her life, how to be a competitive swimmer, then surely he can teach and you can learn the difference between a square and a triangle."

She laid the permission slip on the bed, stood up, and threw one last parting shot.

"Naomi Jean, I would suggest you and your Mr. Yeager get your priorities straight."

Naomi blurted out, "What if I improve my grades next quarter? Then can I do it?"

Her mother was almost out of the room. She stopped, turned slowly, and paused for a moment before responding.

"I don't think so, Naomi. What about your hair? Unless of course Mr. Yeager is planning to come here every night and wash and press your hair, cause I sure ain't going to do it."

Naomi jumped off the bed. "Mama, I can do it. I'm old enough."

"You mean you should be old enough . . . that's for sure. But who goes outta here every morning with the back of her hair looking like a chicken's behind? Girl, you don't even take time to brush your nappy hair . . . and now you're talking about pressing it. I don't think so."

Naomi flopped back on the bed with her hands pressed behind her head, glaring at the ceiling. She wanted to say that she hated her mother and hated her hair.

"I hate my hair!"

"Well, you can blame your no-good daddy for that."

"If he was so no-good, mama, why did you marry him?"

In a flash, her mother's expression went from surprise to anger to just emptiness.

"I married your father because I was pregnant with you. It was the worst mistake I ever made."

Her entire body seemed to slump. She turned around and left the room.

Later that night tears streamed down Naomi's face as she stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Using her mother's brand-new sewing shears, she one by one cut off each of her thickly woven plaits. Then she stood on her tiptoes, straining to reach the top shelf of the storage cabinet, her hands frantically searching for the electric clippers her mother used to give Uncle Billy his weekly haircut.

With the clippers in hand, Naomi meticulously removed every single strand of her misbehavin' hair. As it fell like soft black cotton balls around her feet, Naomi looked up and caught her new reflection in the mirror. Her naked head startled her. Sobbing uncontrollably, she slowly slid her backside down the wall of cold white tiles. She curled up as small as she could way back in the corner and waited for the beating that was sure to come.