

to be young, gifted, and black professional

May 19

I was looking good! As soon as I stepped off the elevator, I felt the envious, starstruck stares. There I was in my stylish, classy heels that slimmed my legs; fitted, but conservative skirt that accentuated my curves; a bohemian blouse that not only made my two soldiers stand at attention but proved I had my own style; hip, unique accessories that flattered my round face, as well as my total look; and of course my fresh mini-braids that were gathered in a vibrant scarf that complemented my silk, caramel skin: I was the poster child for “black professional.”

The eyes followed every secure step I made across the room to my cubicle. And, of course, when I landed, a bunch of fans started to circle, not only to ask for my autograph, but they all wanted to know how I became a superstar and advice on how they, too, could become famous.

I kept getting various questions and touches all day.
“Wow! Your hair looks fabulous!”

“How did you do that?”

“How did you grow your hair that fast?”

“Did it hurt?”

I felt like a newborn that everyone wanted a chance to hold. I didn't mind. I kinda enjoyed the attention. But instead of just taking their turn to touch the hair and say, “That's nice,” some of course had to tickle and pry until I became agitated.

Of course, the first comment was from nosy Lisa.

“You look just like that singer, uh, Brandy. How did they do that?” Lisa asked.

“It's just braided into my hair,” I answered.

“Oh! At first I thought that maybe you had a secret on how to grow hair.”

“No, my real hair is still the same length,” I explained.

“What do you mean real hair? So, this isn't your hair?”

It's funny, they know every lyric to our music and all the dance steps from our videos, but whenever it involves something they can't learn or enjoy, they're ignorant. But to be fair, I guess, why would they know? I don't know the number for the “perfect” shade of blond. However, I don't become bitter or envious when I'm not invited to the blond convention. And I'm not totally ignorant to the maintenance of white hair. So, why can't they have just a little knowledge of mine? I know it's not important, but hell, we all had to learn algebra.

“It's so pretty! Can I touch it?”

“Sure.”

As Paige ran her fingers through my hair, she professed, “Ooh, it feels so soft and silky, so real.”

“It is real.”

“How is it real?”

“It's human hair,” I explained.

"How do they do that?"

"I don't know. It comes in a package."

"Do you think I could sell some of my hair and have it packaged?" she wondered.

"I don't know."

"How much do you think I can get for my hair? It's just as long as this. Actually, mine may even be silker."

"I don't know," I said again.

And don't you just hate when you have to explain the process, like you have a cosmetologist license? Later in the morning, Diane asked her round of questions.

"You look gorgeous! How long did that take?" Diane asked.

"Sixteen hours."

"When did you sleep?"

"It wasn't a straight sixteen hours. We took breaks."

"But did you have to sit still?" she asked.

"Yeah, while she was braiding."

"And how did she do it exactly?"

"It's just like when you braid your hair," I explained. "And then she just braided the human hair into mine. Afterward, she glued the ends so it doesn't come apart."

"Oh, that isn't all your hair?"

See what I mean. It was explanation after explanation. I think I told the story more than a child hears the word no. But school was far from over. Weaves 202 was too advanced for some people so I eventually had to teach Black Hair 101.

"That's amazing! But, can you shampoo it everyday?" Miranda asked.

"Why would I wash it every day?"

I knew where this was going, but I decided to play along.

"Don't you shampoo your own hair every day?" she asked.

"No."

"What? How do you not wash your hair every day?" she asked, disgusted.

"Black women don't have to wash our hair everyday because our hair isn't as oily as white hair."

She was somewhat disgusted. "Arrgh! That's gross. Doesn't it smell?"

"No."

"Doesn't it get dirty?"

"See, you have oily hair. So, when you wash your hair every day, you still have oil," I started to explain, "but I don't. So, if I washed my hair every day, it would strip the little oil that I do have. And it's no big deal because our hair is used to not being shampooed everyday."

Suddenly she had discovered a conventional method that she, too, could possibly try. "Well, maybe I should stop shampooing my hair every day. It's been really dry lately."

"I don't know."

Will that school bell ring? I'm so tired of teaching the slow children.

My mama used to say, "be careful what you wish for," and she is so right. I was soon faced with the valedictorian of black knowledge, Amy.

"It's so beautiful! So, how long does that last?"

"About three months," I answered for the tenth time.

"Wow! That's great that you don't have to do anything for three months. I remember when I tried to do that to my hair. It didn't even last two days. The braids wouldn't stay. Probably because your hair is thicker than mine."

"Maybe," I said, shrugging.

"So, what do you do when you sleep?"

Oh, a question for me? I thought you knew.

"I just sleep with a scarf."

"Maybe I can try it again. Do you think it will work this time?"

"What?"

"You know, braiding my hair," she said.

Do you tell her what she wants to hear or what she needs to hear?

"Umm."

"Well, you know, Bo Derek started it all," she exclaimed.

You have to know when to pick your battles, and this is one where I just can't walk away.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Didn't you see the movie Ten?"

"Yeah, but who do you think Bo Derek stole it from?"

"If I'm not mistaken, she started it," she insisted.

"Actually, she didn't. Braiding was around decades before Bo Derek. It originated in Africa."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Oh. Well, I have to get back to work."

Some people just don't want to learn. What can you do? It was funny because after that discussion, no one approached me for the rest of the day to compliment my new hairdo. I'm sure that Amy had told the entire floor about my resistance to accept that their ancestors had created "everything." That was probably why Kathy got involved.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" Kathy asked.

"Sure."

"It's about, how can I put this? I'm not sure if you're dressed appropriately for our work environment."

"What do you mean? I wasn't aware that there was

a strict dress code on Fridays. You're in jeans and a T-shirt."

"Well, yeah, but I was actually talking about your head wrap. I think that it falls under the no baseball caps rule."

"But it's not a cap."

"Yeah, that's where there's a gray line because what would you call it?"

"Culture."

"Oh, is it a black—I mean African-American—tradition?"

"No, it isn't. And it's not a baseball cap either."

She decided to back down because the last thing she wanted on a Friday afternoon was a confrontation, especially with a black—I mean African-American—woman.

"I'm sorry if I offended you. It's just that I wasn't sure."

"No, no problem. I'm glad I could be of some help. Now you know that it's not a baseball cap."

"Oh, okay. Well, I have to get going. I just want you to know that you're doing a fantastic job and you're an asset to this company."

She had watched one too many management tapes, but if that's what it took to end this stupid conversation, so be it.

"Thank you."

"And you look so nice today. I love your hair," she added.

"Thanks."

I'm gonna wear another head wrap on Monday just to piss her off.