

When I Looked in the Mirror

When I looked in the mirror as a girl, I saw many images. As a very young girl, I thought myself extremely beautiful. A princess in fact, with lovely brown hair, big brown eyes; perfectly beautiful. This must have been true, after all, as my doting mother, grandmother and grandfather assured me of this nearly every day.

Before my fifth birthday, the image in the mirror changed. My loving mother had gone, taking with her the image of the beautiful princess. The little girl in the mirror was no longer happy or beautiful. An ugly little brown-skinned girl with nappy, frizzy hair had replaced her. This little girl was surly not a princess, for no one told her she was a princess anymore. She was now a pauper, a small worker and companion for a father who showed no happiness or love, but rather only anger and bitterness after his wife had left them.

As I grew older, the image in the mirror became my enemy. This image in fact would betray me, reflecting back a teenager who did not fit in with the images around her. It was an image I despised and tried desperately to change. A cloths pin would be attached to my nose daily for as long as I could bear the pain; maybe this would keep my nose from becoming too wide. A gorilla nose was in store for me, it was my fate unless I endured the cloths pin long enough to stop the widening effect I witnessed on other black people on television. Do all black people have gorilla noses, I wondered. I had no idea really, I knew no other black people.

The reflection showed lips that would soon be very full and dry. Nigger lips, the kids would say would certainly be in store for me. I tried many exercises to try to stop the inevitable, holding my lips inward in a sort of pierced position several times during the day. I am not sure how I came up with this ritual, although it seemed to be effective at the time.

The mirror mocked me with my unruly, fuzzy hair. This hair that no one knew how to style. This hair that rebelled against the shampoos and conditioners meant for someone else. Hours would be spent fixing this hair; the mirror would watch me with the curling irons and hairspray until I was sure this horrid, awful hair would lay down. The mirror scoffed at me later as I returned with the original matted mess once again.

While the mirror had many weapons to use against me, nappy hair, gorilla nose, nigger lips (as Amanda used to call them), its most lethal one was wrapped around me, covering me in shame from head to toe. The image was unbearable, brown, brown, brown, everywhere. "How can you stand to look so dirty all of the time?" someone asked me. "What is it like to be the color of shit?" another would taunt. What was it like? It was the worst existence imaginable to me. All forms of masking attempts were employed against this unacceptable skin; makeup meant for my Caucasian stepmother, baby powder layered on my face, lightening creams caked on by the hour, white lotions that were not rubbed in completely...

This brown cover lay over me, smothering me. This skin, my skin, betrayed me every minute of every hour of every day. Every night I would lay in bed and pray, please God take it away, let it be light and beautiful like everyone else's. Every morning I would wake up and find that God had forgotten about me once again.