
After spending 20 years trying to tame the kinks in my hair, I finally stopped messing with Mother Nature and learned to love my look.



Curl Power

When did I start hating my curls? Not when I was 3 years old, or 7, or 10. In photos at those ages I'm looking out from under a mass of kinky black hair—and smiling.

But at the fateful age of 13, my best friend (and fellow curly girl) Zoe and I

started studying teen magazines with a passion our schoolwork never inspired. Zoe and I were desperately seeking clues as to what we were supposed to look like—which is to say, who we were supposed to be. Our unscientific investigation yielded a list of Beauty Musts:

Size: 2.

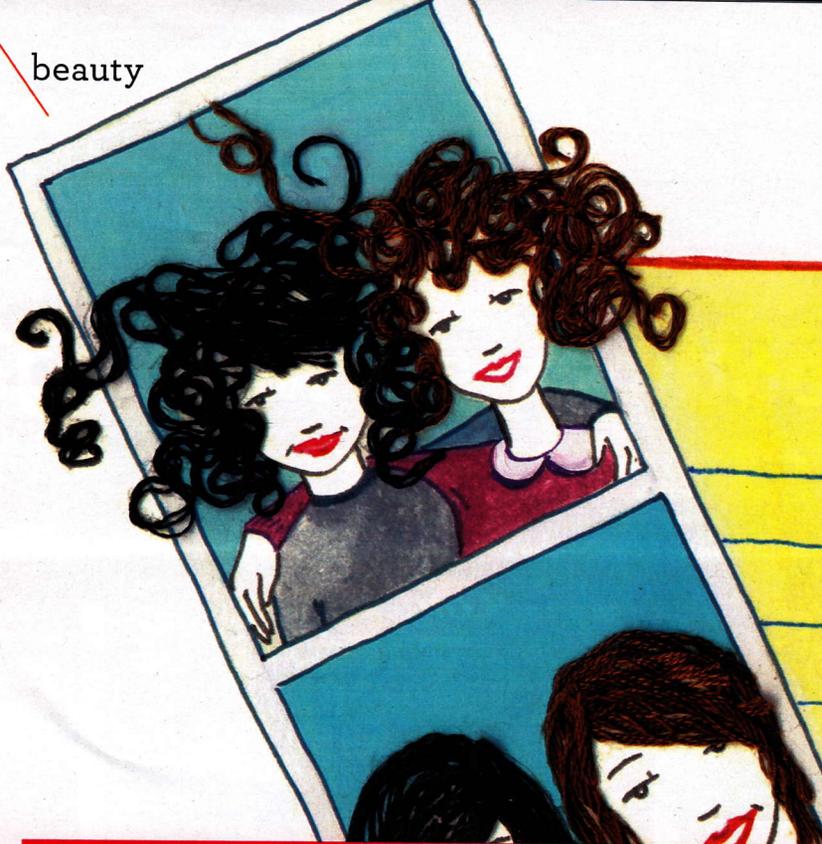
Complexion: flawless.

Clothes: hot-off-the-runway chic.

Ethnicity: none.

Hair: straight.

Zoe and I got the message. We were 0 for 5. And what could we do to raise our scores? Not a heck of a lot. We were already dieting, of course—as I mentioned, we were American teenage girls. With teenage complexions and



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teenage wardrobe budgets and tight-knit Jewish families, there wasn’t much we could do about our skin or our clothes or our ethnicity. But straight hair? That was a project to which we could devote our considerable energies. And that’s exactly what we did.

The more we researched, the clearer our culture’s curlophobia became. In every makeover story, the girls in the “before” pictures had hair like ours, but in the “after” shots they had the straight hair of the celebrities we worshipped.

Zoe and I—both fans of high drama and ritual—pricked our pinkies, mingled blood and took a solemn vow: We’d never let ourselves go out of the house looking like one of those “before” shots.

I can still feel the orange-juice cans I wrapped my hair around at night before attempting to sleep and the hairbrush headaches I gave myself each morning while beating my Brillo-top into tempo-

rary submission. I became an amateur meteorologist, with my head as barometer. I’d stick it out the window first thing every morning to assess the strength of my enemy—humidity. The more moisture in the air, the more hair spray I used. There were days when, if you touched my hair, it would crunch.

In eighth grade (when the stakes got higher—boys!) I ramped up my efforts. My family lived in New York City and every six weeks I rode the bus uptown to the “conk parlors” of Harlem. Conking is a hard-core, lye-based method of straightening kinky hair and it was my secret weapon—until the morning I woke up to find a clump of hair on my pillow. With lye no longer on the menu, I turned to more-labor-intensive but less-risky methods, like ironing, bonnet hairdryers and huge rollers.

For the rest of my young adulthood my life revolved around keeping my straight-hair persona in place and that naturally curly haired woman incognito. I’d love to say that a sudden burst of self-acceptance broke this habit, but in my case it was something far less enlightened: desperation.

By that time I had two kids and a full-time job and I was willing to try almost anything that would give me a little more time in my packed schedule. So one Saturday morning I left the kids with my husband and sought the advice of someone who really knew her curls.

Betty was the first black woman to cut my hair, but apparently I wasn’t her first kinky client to hide behind a straight-haired screen. When I begged for a way to simplify my styling routine, Betty layered my hair, then subdued it with handfuls of a magic potion ironically called “curl activator.” Suddenly my unmanageable frizz was replaced with well-mannered ringlets.

Betty’s wash-curl-activate-and-go style added two hours to my day. For the first time since age 13 I was wearing my own hair, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. I was in curly-hair heaven. And I stayed there—I mean, *exactly* there—for another decade.

Fast-forward to this year, when I flew in from California to visit Zoe in New York. We’d arranged to meet at our favorite Manhattan sushi joint, but I barely recognized my childhood best friend with her stick-straight hair.

“Japanese thermal straightening treatment,” she greeted me. “It costs a fortune, but it’s worth every cent. People take me more seriously with straight hair. I’ve gotten whistles, dates, even jobs I wouldn’t have gotten with that mop on my head.”

I stared at her, feeling betrayed. And I thought about a recent makeover story I’d seen. Flipping from

LOVE YOUR CURLS!

Don’t let your unruly locks rule your life. Get tips at LHJ.com/curly.

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one before-and-after to the next, I'd felt that time had stood still. Just like in the magazines of my youth, several of the "before" shots featured sad-looking curly-heads. In the "after" shots straight-haired beauties beamed.

In so many ways we'd come a long way, baby, since Zoe and I were self-bashing teens. On the hair front, though? Not so much. In comedian Chris Rock's 2009 documentary, *Good Hair*—which explores why so many African-American women want to straighten their hair—Rock offers some kinky "black hair" to a wig-shop owner. "Everyone want straight hair," the Asian owner explains, refusing the offer. "It look more natural."

"We still live in a world where the WASP stereotype has a tremendous hold on our imaginations," says author Lorraine Massey in her curly-hair how-to book, *Curly Girl*. Even straight-haired superstar Angelina Jolie reportedly complained, after she went shopping for a doll that resembled her Ethiopian daughter, Zahara. "I look for a Barbie that's African, and the African Barbie has straight hair!"

As we ordered our miso soup, Zoe announced with the kind of bluntness only a lifelong friend could get away with, "If you must wear your hair curly, at least get a new style. You outgrew that look 10 years ago. There are all kinds of new curl products out there now. Go find yourself some."

A few days later I sat in the waiting area of a posh San Francisco salon that specializes in curly hair. The hair-cutters and clients alike were a collage of diversity: black, white, Asian and

Latina; old, young and in between. And the place actually smelled nice! No fumes from chemical straighteners stung my nostrils and I didn't smell hair being blow-fried into compliance.

The salon owner, Marie, led me to her chair, smiled into the mirror and asked, "What would you like to do with your beautiful curls today?"

For years I'd been playing it safe, believing that the only thing that tethered my hair to gravity was its weight. I'd answered that question by saying, "Just a trim, please," again and again and again. My long hair had been my signature through five presidents, two marriages, three careers and more changes of heart and mind than I could count. Maybe it was time for my hair to catch up to my ever-evolving self.

Ninety minutes later Marie handed me a mirror and then spun my chair around. "So, how do you like your new short hair?" she asked. I stared at my reflection, completely stunned. Could those perfectly formed, bouncy, utterly un-frizzy curls really be mine?

I left the salon under a shower of compliments and floated to my car, peering at myself in shop windows, feeling lightheaded—literally. And thinking that the change might affect more than just my hair.

My lifelong war with my curls has kept me at odds with myself, engaged in a futile struggle to be, or at least look like, someone else. Now I realize that the road to self-acceptance isn't always a straight line. But the long and the short of it is, getting there is well worth the twists, turns and curls along the way. ■

Curly Cues

Big and bouncy or tight and twisty—whichever way your curls unfurl, you can make them more beautiful.



← Do you have springy spirals like Debra Messing or Keri Russell?

TOP PRIORITY
Fight frizz and add definition.



HOW TO DO IT Coat wet strands with styling gel using your fingers to shape the curl. Air-dry or diffuse to set.

Garnier Fructis Style Curl Scrunch Gel, \$5



← Do you have dense, kinky curls like Community star Yvette Nicole Brown or Jada Pinkett-Smith?

TOP PRIORITY

Hydrate dry hair and add shine to dull-looking twists.

HOW TO DO IT Saturate damp curls with a nourishing cream.



Miss Jessie's Curly Meringue, \$22



← Do you have soft, loose waves like Sarah Jessica Parker or Jennifer Lopez?

TOP PRIORITY
Maintain shape

and tame flyaways. **HOW TO DO IT** Comb a lightweight mousse through hair and gently scrunch when drying.



Aussie Catch The Wave Mousse + Leave-In Conditioner, \$3.25

And Don't Forget...

All curls are prone to dryness, so conditioning sprays and masks are a must. Boost luster with a shine serum.



Pantene Curly Deep Moisturizing Treatment, \$6



Ouidad Botanical Boost, \$16



John Frieda Frizz-Ease Hair Serum Extra-Strength, \$10

—MANDY HENDRIX

S. GRANITZ/GETTY IMAGES (MESSING); ALBERTO RODRIGUEZ/GETTY IMAGES (BROWN); PAUL SCHULBACH/GLOBE PHOTOS (PARKER).