

"Hair!"

My sister with the Afro

By Jennifer Kim

KoreAm Journal (national Asian American magazine)

November 2005 issue



I'm not sure when my older sister, Mina*, started disliking me and my straight hair. It could date back to an early family Christmas photo (I was 7, she was 8-and-a-half), where the differences in our coifs are noticeable.

Or it could even go farther back to my crib days. Another family photo shows my toddler sister reaching through the bars, attempting to comb my baby-fine hair. I was an oblivious, drunken-looking baby. My sister, on the other hand, looked a little torn: Was she trying to comb me or hurt me?

For a Korean kid, Mina had hair like coarse cotton candy. No one in our family can explain how this came to be. Most Koreans, like most Asians, usually have straight black hair from birth. My father and I shared cowlicks, but that's the extent of our waviness. But my sister had dark, dry, frizzy hair that rose about three inches off her head — a Korean 'fro, if you will.

My parents joked that Mina's hair came from the southern countryside of Korea, where we once had peasant roots. Koreans often practice a twisted "reverse psychology" form of showing affection, which some may "mistake" for cruelty, and perhaps rightly so. Another theory is that a misguided childhood perm from the Duke and Duchess Salon had permanently damaged Mina's roots. So exasperated was my mother by my sister's hair, that she slathered it in olive oil every night to tame it.

I felt bad that my older sister had unruly hair, whereas I was bequeathed with regal straight locks. But I didn't feel so bad that I refrained from teasing her. "Hello, peasant," I'd say, before darting away, as Mina unleashed her dagger-like claws. Sometimes my sister would corner me and slowly dig her fingernails into my flesh, laughing sinisterly as she drew blood.

To compensate for what they deemed her follicular shortcomings, people complimented my sister's elegant hands and manicured nails. "Mina, you could become a hand model," they'd say. Mina obliged by dipping her hand in a clear bowl of green Palmolive, just like Madge did in her commercials.

In addition to coarse hair, my sister inherited a darker complexion compared to other family members. We called it "southern" skin. Peasants were darker because they worked outside, extended the family joke. To me, my sister always looked more African American than Korean. I thought she bore a striking resemblance to the queen of soul, Aretha Franklin. Whenever I saw Aretha on TV or in magazines, I'd get Mina right away and say, "You know, you look just like her." My sister never appreciated my comparisons.

Mina never quite knew what to do with her hair. As we got ready for school, I watched my sister as she sat on the bottom bunk, balancing a mirror between her knees. A self-taught braider, Mina's hands worked quickly, almost as if they were robotic. Sometimes she would lace ribbons through her braids. Her hair rested flat against her head and she looked like a wet seal.

At this time, she was also wearing photograys, light-sensitive glasses that would darken at any inkling of brightness. The TV screen, fluorescent school lights and snow were some of the catalysts. So my sister slouched through puberty with two super-tight braids and darkened eyes over her chubby, brown face. She rarely smiled.

Once on the school bus, a neighbor boy harassed my sister. He leaned in close and said things to her that I couldn't hear. He had a vicious look in his face. The spit from his words sprayed the ends of Mina's hair. My dark-faced sister silently endured his menacing attack by staring out the window. She wasn't getting the respect that Aretha commanded. I felt sick over what I witnessed, yet I did nothing.

Wouldn't it have been worse if I, as the younger sister, told the boy to leave my older sister alone? The teasing probably would have been worse then, or so I like to rationalize. My sister was already the owner of hurtful nicknames like Butch and Jabba the Hutt. From that moment on, I decided that I wouldn't tease her anymore. We walked home in silence that day.

When we were 12 and 13-and-a-half years old, Mina cut my face out of all the pictures in her photo album. Afterward, she handed me an envelope full of my severed, floating heads. She was trying to tell me something. But I wasn't sure what it was. Did she hate the sight of me? Did she want me out of the family? Was she jealous? I never wanted to accept that my older sister might be envious of me. It didn't seem possible. Instead I developed sibling guilt, kind of like

survivor's guilt, where the surviving members of a horrible atrocity feel guilty for still being alive. I felt guilt about having straight hair and lighter skin. But trust me, with my headgear and pink glasses, I was no beauty queen either.

In high school, Mina experimented with a short, above-the-ear-length haircut that made her head look like a small bush. It was not a hairstyle with great definition, but it was better than the braids. Also, she had shed her photograys and now wore large, round frames. My sister looked like an owl. Mina the owl was editor of our school's literary magazine and had found a niche of creative, cynical friends. She also became prematurely gray. For the senior page in her yearbook, Mina chose not to include a picture of herself.

When Mina went to college, she decided to reclaim her hair. She grew it out, past her shoulders. Her mane was large and frizzy, but now bold. Mina's friends would stroke her hair and say how much they liked the wave and thickness. Her African American female friends asked to touch her hair.

At this time, Depeche Mode and the Cure influenced Mina's style of dress: a kind of Goth look. Her favorite color was black, and she wore it from head to toe. She adorned her arms with black rubber bracelets, her waist with metal belts, and went clubbing regularly. She enjoyed her hair flying freely as she danced. My sister looked like a punked-out Earth mother. Mina also pretended that I didn't exist and neglected to tell her college friends that she had a younger sister, until I followed her there a year later.

College and post-college were good years for Mina. People did not judge her by her hair or skin color. Instead, she received compliments on what made her unique. She did not look like every other Asian. She also felt better seeing that my hairstyle hardly changed. My hair was too slippery to hold braids and too straight for a curling iron to have any lasting effect. My hair presented no real variety, she told me.

Mina is now 36 with two young children: Henry, 4, and Lily, 1. Both children were born with soft masses of black hair. We still don't know the verdict on their locks, but motherhood has given my sister a short, bushy hairstyle that is easy to care for.

Upon a recent visit, my sister presented me with a 5" x 7" of her family portrait. I was in shock. My sister looked unrecognizable to me, nothing like her former incarnations, more like she was part of a missionary family en-route to a foreign country. She had a grin on her face that I had never seen before. Was that the grin of contentment?

After an odyssey of hair traumas, it seems that my sister has finally settled on a short-haired look that works for her, now that she is a mother.

And now I'm the envious one.

**Name changed upon request. Essay updated, July 2020.*