

Frizz and Freedom

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In the classrooms of my childhood, conformity was not just encouraged—it was expected. Straight, glossy hair framed the faces of nearly every girl I knew, as if we had all been stamped from the same mold. Mine refused to obey. It curled, coiled, and twisted, writhing like a river against the banks of my brush and iron. I stood in front of the mirror each morning, straightener in hand, pulling the iron through strands until steam rose in searing wisps. With every ironed layer—I flattened more than hair—I flattened myself.

Compliments were not part of the vocabulary in China. No one paid attention to my hair, much less celebrated the wild curls I tried so hard to tame. Praise was better measured in grades, or in parents murmuring that your effort had not been wasted. Difference was dangerous like a loose thread in a delicate tapestry. Disapproval was at risk for standing out, or worse, ridicule. So, I wove myself into the background, hiding my curls as a quiet surrender to the safety of sameness.

When I moved to the United States for high school, I packed the same straightener in my suitcase as if it were a survival tool, clinging to it in the way a traveler grips a compass in unfamiliar terrain. As my plane descended, Oregon greeted me with forests of towering trees with branches weaving a canopy over winding roads that lead me to classrooms filled with voices I had never imagined. What startled me most, was the language of kindness that fluttered around like leaves in the wind. Strangers tossed them like petals: “I love your jacket!” “You did so well!” “That’s a great idea.” The first time someone complimented me, I flinched. It felt suspicious, too easy, almost unearned.

Back home, kindness was woven into small, wordless acts: making sure a friend had eaten, lending notes, correcting mistakes so you could improve. Kindness is loud here, direct, and often felt directed at me as the international student everyone wanted to welcome. Their

intentions were warm, but the spotlight felt forced. Yet I straightened my hair each morning before school, pressing it into silence.

It wasn't a single lightning strike that changed me but a steady dawn of small moments. In my American classrooms, no two students looked alike. Hair spilled down shoulders in braids, frizz, waves, and curls; while some blazed with color, others cut it short or shaved it altogether. Clothes didn't match a uniform, but reflected personalities with bright patterns, Birkenstocks, and oversized hoodies. Differences were treated like a given, almost expected—no one seemed afraid of judgment. For the first time, I wondered what it would feel like to let myself be seen as I truly was.

So, one morning, I set down the straightener. My reflection caught me off guard: curls spiraling in every direction, finally allowed to be themselves. I walked into class bracing for whispers and laughter. Instead, voices met me with something else entirely: “Your hair looks amazing!” “I want curls too!” My cheeks burned not from shame, but from something new and overwhelming.

It might seem trivial—just hair. But that day marked the beginning of something larger. For years, I had believed difference meant defect. My Chinese upbringing had taught me humility through blending in, and my American classroom revealed that individuality could be celebrated. Compliments began to feel like bridges. They connected me to others across gaps of culture and language. Slowly, I started to give them too, discovering how a few words could brighten someone else's day.

Looking back, I see more than curls. I see two cultures offering different ways of showing care: one through quiet actions, the other through open encouragement. Neither is

superior, but together they create a more complete understanding of connection. I no longer press my curls into silence. They remind me that insecurities can become a source of strength. They remind me that listening, learning, and celebrating differences are not contradictions to a community but complements that make it whole. In the meeting of cultures, something new is always born—not a choice between standing out or blending in, but a balance that allows both.

I straightened my hair to conform in Beijing, but a new environment invited me to live more authentically. Between the two, I came to see myself as part of a world where every voice has room to breathe.