

Can the Church Say Amen?

Judy's grandma Brenda washed, conditioned, detangled and plaited Judy's hair. A combination of leave-in conditioner and water dripped down Judy's forehead. Judy sat at the dining room table trying to recover from the battle between Brenda's heavy-handedness and her tight curl pattern. Her scalp and temples throbbed. Brenda had raked through small sections of wet hair with a comb that had teeth the size of rulers, ignoring Judy's pleas to "stop," to "wait a minute." Brenda told Judy it was her fault that it hurt, she shouldn't have been "tender headed." Judy's little sister, Monique, had finer hair. Her mixed daddy had blessed her. She had that "good hair" with the looser curl that Brenda loved to brag about.

Judy and Monique would have to wake up early the next morning to get their hair blow dried, combed, pressed, and curled. Judy flinched as she thought about the smokey metal comb and its heat nearing the back of her neck. She shivered at the thought of the piping hot comb working its way to the hair near the back of her ears. She moaned as she thought about Brenda straightening her baby hair along the edges of her head. Brenda claimed Judy's hair held heat and that's what Judy felt whenever she jumped from the shock of heat on her skin. But when it was all over she knew she'd rush to the bathroom and turn on the vanity lights above the mirror and pray that she wouldn't sweat out her press and curl. Now it was time for Judy's other sister, Tiara, to be transformed into decency.

Tiara sat in the chair positioned in the middle of the kitchen. A burgundy towel with a bleach stain on one end was wrapped around her shoulders. Tiara went through this process every three weeks, but this was the first time Judy decided to watch. Tiara sucked her index finger and twisted the ends of her reddish brown hair with her free hand. Her big lips drooped

into a frown. Her hair was damp and limp. Instead of shrinking and forming into an afro like Judy and Monique's hair, Tiara's hair looked like a wet dog. The hair stopped just past her earlobes. The *Just for Me* box stood out amongst the *Mane 'n Tail* product. A Black girl with bangs, Shirley Temple curls and a butterfly barrette in her hair smiled on the box. She looked like she could be a cousin or a long lost sister. Brenda tore off the top of the box, ripping the face of the Black girl on the package in half. Then she poured a deep green liquid into a clear jar filled with white cream. She used a thin black brush with a toothpick looking end and mixed. Judy wiped her brow with the back of her hand as she watched Brenda work in the kitchen. Tiara's toes bent down and up as she waited. Brenda mixed and mixed and mixed until it was time to add a golden oil to the light green combination in the jar. Brenda tapped the now empty container on the side of the jar to make sure she used all of the oil and placed it on the edge of the counter. The empty bottle fell.

"Shit! Judy come pick this up for me."

Judy walked over, picked up the empty bottle and looked inside. A small amount of oil had escaped and dripped down the side. Judy placed the bottle back on the counter and rubbed the slick oil between her thumb and middle finger. Brenda finished mixing and made Tiara stand up and walk over to the sink so she could do another pre-rinse before the process. Judy looked inside the jar. The mixture looked like frosting.

"Girl, go sit down. You act like you ain't ever seen this stuff before."

Judy rolled her eyes and sat back at the dining room table. "I don't get why we need to even do all of this just for Easter Sunday. All we're going to do is sit in church," Judy said as she

watched Monique twist her neck back and forth. Small drops of water flickering in every direction.

"First of all, as long as y'all living in this house y'all are going to abide by my rules," Brenda guided Tiara back to the seat, "And second, Our Father died on the cross, this is Resurrection Sunday. You know I don't celebrate no damn Easter," Brenda said as she slapped a glob of the cream along the edges of Tiara's hair.

"I just don't get it. Why do we need to get all fancy for the Lord? I thought he loved us no matter what. So why do we need to get our hair done and wear new clothes?"

"Girl shut up and sit there and be a child."

Monique skipped down the hallway singing the Just for Me theme song.

"I want style, body and shine. A look that's totally all mine. Hair so soft, silky and free. I want something just for me. Just for meeee!" Judy joined in with the last three words, "Just for meeeeee!"

Tiara wiped her finger on her thigh, "Stop singing that song."

"Why?" Judy asked. Whenever the commercial came on they would all sing it together. They hardly ever saw a commercial with such an uptempo beat and girls that looked like them dancing and singing on TV. It was a feel good song.

Tiara dropped her neck, and Brenda slapped the back of it.

"TT your ass need to sit still so I can get this in the right. Stop moving!"

Tiara's head rose. Her eyes were closed, but tears outlined her short eyelashes. "You're trying to make fun of me! You and Mo," she said through her teeth.

"No, I'm not! I like that song," Judy said.

"All y'all shut up. Tiara now hold still. I don't wanna get this on your skin."

"But you're putting it on her hair," Judy said as she hummed the beat to the song under her breath.

"Look, watch your got damn mouth. Tiara ain't got good hair like you and Monique. I'm just trying to help her out. Now TT hold still."

Judy watched as Tiara closed her eyes again. A slender tear fell down the side of her nose. Why was she crying? She didn't have to deal with Brenda's heavy hand yanking at the roots of her head. She didn't have to wake up early the next morning to get her hair blow dried and pressed.

By now all of Tiara's hair was separated and coated at the roots with the cream.

"Now don't touch it. Let me know when it starts to burn," Brenda said as she turned around to start cleaning up. Tiara's legs swung violently in the creaking chair. Its loose screws made the chair a wobbling tower of blocks. Tiara played with the strings of the seat cushion with one hand and sucked her finger with the other. The chair became her swing, and she swung her legs hard and fast. Her head rose as she swung higher and higher up.

Brenda washed the jar clean. She rinsed out the thin brush. Tiara removed her finger from her mouth, and her small hands managed to grab both the cushion and the wood seat. She squeezed. She wiggled her hips. She shook her head. It hadn't been more than a minute before Tiara screamed out, "It's burning! It's burning!"

"Now TT it ain't been in there long enough for you to be screaming like that. You gotta wait for it to take to your hair."

"No grandma! It's really burning," she started crying. Her hips moving left and right. Her legs curled around the legs of the chair. She looked like she wanted time to stop. She looked like wanted to be anywhere but in that chair.

"Brenda take it out of her head. She's crying. Look!" Judy stood up, pointing her finger at Tiara's scrunched up face.

"Judy, mind your own business and stop telling me what to do. You ain't 'bout to disrespect me in my house."

Brenda walked up to Judy. Judy looked up and stared into her eyes. Monique was still singing the Just for Me song in the hallway.

"I just don't get it. She's hurting. That stuff in her head is hurting her. Why won't you take it out? Why does she have to go through all this pain just for church tomorrow?"

There was a violent crack and boom behind Brenda. Judy broke her stare and gasped as Brenda turned around. Tiara was screaming at the top of her lungs. The chair's legs had snapped in pairs. Two of them were on top of the kitchen mat with the rooster on it, the other two near the dishwasher. The back of the chair and the seat were still connected. Tiara's hands were still clinging onto the cushion and the bottom of the seat. She squirmed like a cockroach on its back, painting the floor with the cream from her hair. Judy was afraid of what was going to happen next. But she knew. She knew Tiara's screaming had gone mute in Brenda's ears. She knew Brenda only saw a broken possession. She knew Tiara's head would continue to burn until Tiara answered Brenda's question of "What the fuck were you doing that you broke my chair?" So Judy walked over to Tiara and picked her up as best she could. She pulled her crying sister down the hallway, pushing past Monique. She turned the bath handle to the right, ice cold water rushed

out of the grimy faucet. She grabbed Tiara's head between her hands and said, "Stop crying. Please. Stop crying." Tiara's scream quieted down and sounded more like an old hymn in church. Judy hurried and baptized her sister's burning scalp into the water just as Brenda burst into the bathroom and yanked Judy's arm.

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As soon as Brenda parked the car, Judy pulled up the lock and opened the door. They had stopped to pick up two of Brenda's sisters in Christ, Niecey, and Gloria, so Judy, her sisters and Niecey were smashed together in the backseat. The sun was bright and made all of the pinks, greens, blues, and yellows of the churchgoers' ensembles look rich. Made the black skin look regal. Brenda was wearing an all white skirt suit with a pop of red on her lips that matched her nails. She smiled at Monique and showed off her gold tooth that she had a hard time finding earlier, making them almost late picking up her friends. People rushed past them, racing each other for the closest seats to the pulpit. Brenda licked her thumb and wiped some crud out of Judy's eyes.

"Did you wash your face? I can't ever take y'all anywhere. Don't pull away let me get this off."

"But it smells like your breath," Judy said as she wiped the spit off.

"Girl..."

Gloria tapped Brenda on the shoulder, "Sister, don't work yourself up. You know how kids are. She just showing out." Gloria looked at Judy and smiled, showing three gold teeth. Gloria was always trying to act like she had it all together, but she slept around and was living in

Long Beach because she got caught having an affair with her sister's husband. Brenda didn't trust Gloria around her husband, Bill, but she liked her because she knew Gloria never judged her. Niecey was this really skinny woman whose husband beat up on her all the time, so she had a nervous tick. Whenever she was around, Judy would swing an arm near her just to see her flinch. Judy's dress had a flower print on it. There was a combination of pinks and reds on a white background. Ruffles ran from her shoulders down to the waist of the dress where there was a big silky white bow in the front. The dress stopped exactly at her knees. Brenda made her wear white stockings, even though they made her itch. Judy had white glossy shoes with a thick heel. She hated the way they looked, but she loved the clicking sound they made because it made her sound important. Her skin was extra shiny from adding too much baby oil to the lotion that morning. It shined just as bright as her gold bracelet on her wrist with her name and date of birth on it.

"Niecey you ready to hear this word, sister?" Brenda said as she grabbed Monique's hand and led the way. Judy held onto Tiara's hand and couldn't help but notice the small pink blotches on the edges of Tiara's hairline. Niecey shook Judy's shoulders before saying, "Amen Sister Brenda. The Lord about to talk to us today."

An usher, dressed in all white, handed the three women pamphlets with the agenda and donation envelopes inside, then asked Brenda how many seats. The usher made contact with another usher and held up the number six. After the usher had found space for the group, they walked down the red-carpeted aisle to the space made available for them. People from both sides of the aisle took time to look at them from head to toe. Judy returned the stares. A girl about her age wore something very similar, but the colors of the flowers on that girl's dress were brighter.

Her hair was longer. Her shoes were brand new. Judy looked down at her feet and noticed her white church shoes had a black smear on the side.

"Judy! Pay attention, let's go!" Brenda said in a loud whisper.

Brenda said excuse me every two seconds, as they slid past people to get to their seats. Monique stood on her chair to try and see over the people in front of her. Brenda grabbed Monique so quick, no one but Judy saw what happened. Judy looked back down their row to look for the girl with the newer, shinier version of her outfit. She ducked her head under the line of brown hands clapping in unison, but she still couldn't see. She looked down at her feet again. The black scratch looked thicker and darker than it had just a minute ago. She licked her thumb then knelt down to wipe it off. It wouldn't come off. She scratched at it, but she had bitten her nails down too low. She bent her ankles, her left ankle to the left and her right ankle to the right, and stood on the sides of her shoes.

Their seats were close to the back of the church, which was fine because that meant they didn't have to sit behind the women with the big hats. Everyone who was able to stand was standing. Judy had never seen the church so crowded before. She had to sit at an angle and watch the stage from one of the three screens. The camera zoomed in and out on the stage and Judy was finally able to put faces to the voices that had filled the hallway earlier. The choir, like the ushers, were dressed in all white. Their two-step was coordinated to a tee. They clapped and sang in unison. A cross as tall as the building itself hung behind them. There wasn't a body on it, but there was blood and nails on the cross. Judy looked down the aisle and saw the ushers trying to keep a group of people calm because there weren't anymore seats, so the people had to stand in the hallway.

Finally, the deacon came on stage and asked everyone, "How many of y'all believe that the Lord, Jesus Christ, our Savior, died for our sins?" The crowd clapped, but the energy wasn't what the deacon wanted because he said, "Come on now! I asked how many of y'all believe Father God sent Jesus here to die for our sins? I know y'all can do better than that? Allelujah! Can I get an Amen?" The people yelled in praise as the organ and the drum worked to motivate the crowd. Black people in colors was the most beautiful thing she'd seen. Then she saw Gloria, Brenda, and Niecey grooving as the choir started up another song. Praise and worship was always like a concert. Monique looked up at Brenda and tried to copy. Tiara sucked her finger and stared at the ceiling. Judy looked at the spots on Tiara's scalp that were missing skin and shook her head. Was what happened yesterday really worth it? Here they were doing exactly what Judy knew they would do, sit and stare. No one even noticed them really. It wasn't like they were going to be on stage leading the church in prayer. It wasn't like they were in the front row of the church. In that sea of worshippers sitting in the back, they were nobodies. The camera on the screen panned over the congregation. Everyone had their hair either pressed, permed or in a weave. Not one nap in sight. Nails done. New outfits. Was this for The Lord? Or maybe this was for Brenda. Maybe she wanted the world of the church and her friends to remember, to see her taking care of her three beautiful granddaughters. Handling them on her own. Proving her own worth for those two hours.

Soon the music stopped. Announcements and the first set of donations were made. The choir sang again. Then the pastor stood with his black and purple robe with yellow tassels.

"I need everybody to stand and give glory to God," he said as he raised both of his arms and, like well-trained dogs, the sea of people rose.

