MORE THAN JUST COILS

The texture of Mia Fletcher's hair is a direct reflection of her identity. She and her sister have persevered against the comments of society.

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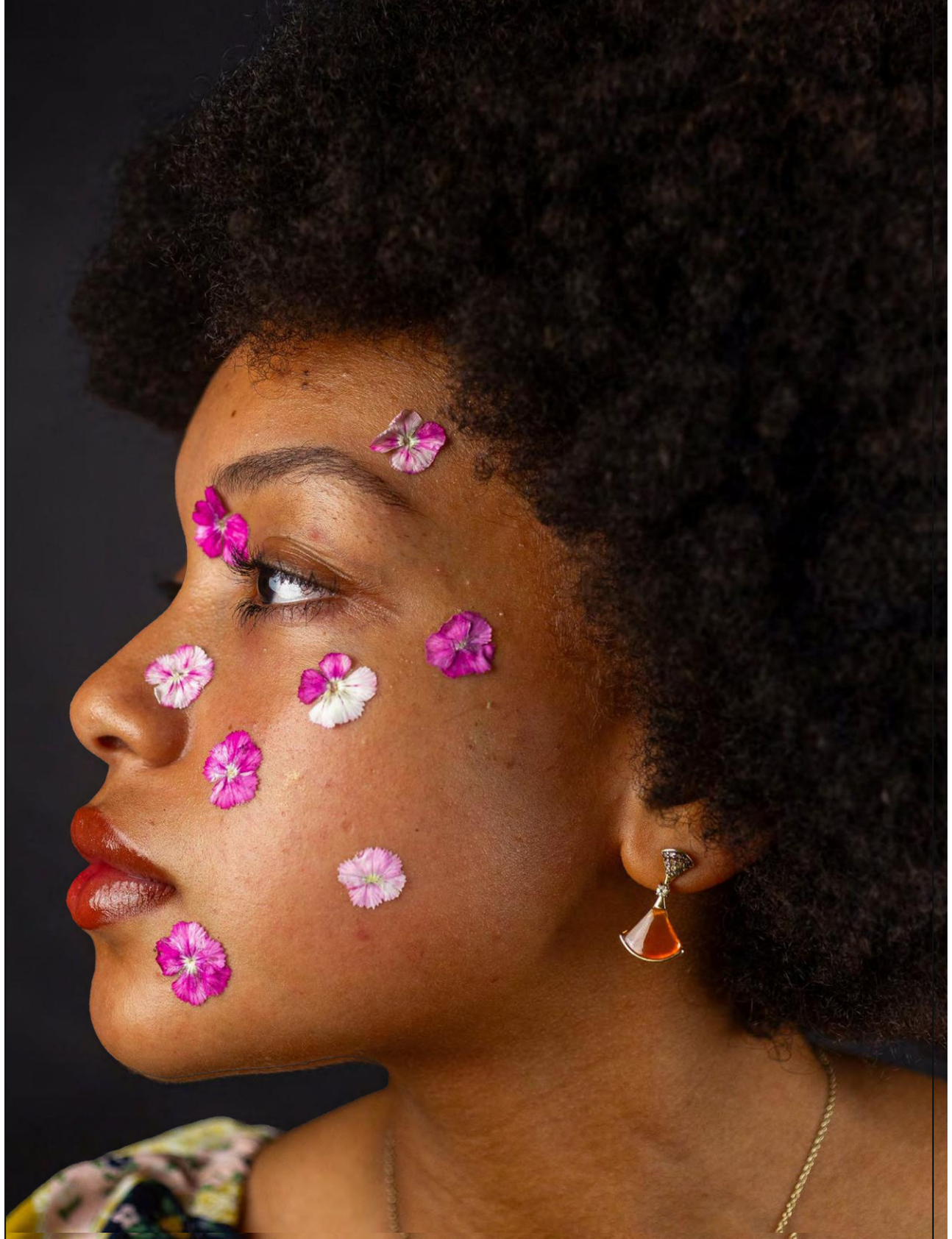

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MIA

Mia Fletcher describes her thick, coily hair as her crown. Her curls wrap around her social identity, encapsulating her experiences as a Black woman. Mia and her sister, Kaya, have begun to learn that their hair is a defining characteristic of their identity and how they are perceived in society.

The sisters' hair has been categorized as different from those who surround them, but they've grown to love their hair.

Mia and Kaya's mom was determined to care of her children's hair in a way that reflected her values of hair health and having pride in natural textures. Their mom has worked through traumatic experiences regarding her own hair, so she wanted to make sure that her children grew up to love their coily hair.

"My mom was never allowed to wear her natural hair," Kaya said. "My grandma dropped her off to be watched by my aunt, and they picked her up with relaxed hair. That's traumatic."

Mia and Kaya's mom was learning how to take care of her children's hair as she was still figuring out what her own hair meant to her. Growing up at the beginning of the natural hair movement, the girls often didn't chemically straighten their hair or braid it. Instead, they wore it naturally. This came with attention from others, many being intrigued by their Afros.

"No one ever said my hair was weird, everyone just thought it was interesting," Mia said. "Kids would touch my hair and be like, 'How did you get it to do that?'"

Hearing disrespectful comments and being put in uncomfortable situations is not a rare occurrence. Not long ago, Kaya faced a microaggression at her place of work when a man came up to her and said, "Did you stick your finger in an electrical socket?"

Confused and unsure about what the man was referencing, Kaya turned to face him in an attempt to get a better understanding of the situation. The man only repeated his racist remark, and Kaya was forced to defuse the dangerous situation by doing her job and asking the man if he needed help finding anything. The man ignored Kaya's discomfort and started making more and more racist comments about her hair. It was then when Kaya realized that his comments were referring to the volume and color of her curly, brightly dyed hair. Her unease was acknowledged by a coworker who had overheard the interaction, justifying her already valid thoughts and actions.

Kaya decided to remove herself from the situation to protect herself both mentally and physically. She kept telling herself to be the bigger person in a situation where she was set up to fail. The most pressing question throughout her mind was "Why?"

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"I was so taken aback because it happened so fast," Kaya said. "I sat in silence afterwards, playing it back in my head. 'Why did this man feel the need to make such a hateful comment? Why did I handle it the way I did? Should have talked back?'"

Kaya has had comments like these directed towards her multiple times in the past. And every time, it's still as shocking as the first. She frequently finds herself questioning her responses to these comments, usually hoping she said something to defend herself during these dehumanizing moments as a means of stopping the moment and getting the other person to recognize her.

Far from unique, these comments aren't only hurtful, they're dangerous and are deeply rooted in racism and prejudice.

"People are so comfortable making a spectacle of us just because we look the way we do," Kaya said. "It's like, I'm not a circus animal. I am a person, not a spectacle to be enjoyed."

She has seen people point at her hair and heard them whisper comments when they thought she couldn't hear them, some saying "Isn't that so crazy?"

The sisters have shared experiences regarding people stepping over their physical boundaries by invading their personal space and wanting to touch their hair that was "different."

"Have I ever gotten the question, "Can I touch your hair?" without a hand already approaching my face? No," Kaya said. "Teachers, adults and strangers are reaching for my hair, hand already on my scalp. 'Can I touch your hair? Oh, your hair is so nice!' I've gotten that my entire life."

The same girls that used to scrutinize Kaya's natural hair are now leaning away from their familiar protective styles and wearing their hair naturally. It created a unique, shared experience of wearing her curls out with her peers, but simultaneously invalidated years of their harmful actions directed towards both her hair and racial identity.

Language and actions like these may at first seem harmless, but the thought process behind this mainstream narrative is rooted in deep racism that oppresses young Black girls like Mia and Kaya.

There is a large misconception that racism is less prevalent today than it used to be. However, racism still permeates much of society today and has appeared in a variety of ways. One, including experiences that are difficult to recognize and understand if you do not live them.

"We're still actively being oppressed," Mia said. "They're very discreetly changing the ways that we're oppressed, even under the products we get sold."

Black hair care is locked behind glass cases in local

KAYA

department stores. Beauty products marketed towards Black people were either non-existent or hidden in the back of stores, further perpetuating the idea that Black people didn't deserve to feel confident in their hair.

"We could never find our hair products anywhere but our local beauty supply shop run by a second generation Chinese immigrant," Mia said. "But now, you find it in Target and Walmart because society decided that we were profitable and we are worth it."

Beyond that, Black beauty products did not often exist in retail stores until the uproar of the Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the murder of Breonna Taylor in 2020.

Mia recalls that when TikTok became popular, many influencers and trends narrowed in on Black culture and exploited practices important to the identities of Black people. This mechanism is referred to as mainstreaming, which describes the process of making a previous something perceived as "other" by our societal norms considered "normal" and often even celebrated.

"It's the idea that the things Black people do aren't worthy until white people start doing it," Mia said. "It's mainstreaming. It's whitewashing."

Mia has seen bonnets and satin pillowcases be used as trends to protect hair when sleeping. But, bonnets and satin pillowcases have been an important part in Black hair care routines for keeping the hair healthy. Black beauty isn't considered beautiful until it's profitable first.

Hair products and ideals from the Black community are often the most vulnerable to mainstreaming. Mia and Kaya both agree that newer "trends" such as non-Black people wearing braids or other protective hairstyles and using products that were not formulated for their hair texture is offensive.

Mia believes that all hair types are different and deserve to be celebrated, however, people without Black hair textures should not comment on Black hair or try to relate to the complex experiences that come along with having Black hair.

Mia has experienced people trying to connect to her and her Black hair in a way that was offensive and uneducated. These instances happen during school, sports and daily life.

"They don't really know how Black hair works," Mia said. "Have you seen Black hair wet? Have you seen Black hair dry?"

Both Mia and Kaya push back against these norms, wanting to see Black hair for what it is: beautiful. They don't want it to be something that's "exotic" or "unmanageable," they want it to be seen as hair. While they love their natural hair, they hate the way society has made it out to be.

They know that black hair is deeply misunderstood. In all of its beauty, the experience of having Afro-textured hair is deeply nuanced. The trauma held in every microaggression never leaves, no matter how strong someone can be.

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