

The Perfect Puff

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I've been sitting on the toilet so long, my butt starts to hurt. I don't have a nice butt or anything, but that toilet seat is going to make it permanently flat. In a year, I'll be in high school; a flat butt is not what I need. But my mama doesn't know how to let things go, so the toilet seat is where I'll sit for another thirty minutes. Mama, if you happen to read this, let things go!

Our bathroom is tiny. Unlike the one at our old house, it's too small for two people to be there at once. It's not like those big bathrooms you see on TV where famous people have sixty-inch television screens, platinum toilets with hot tubs, and ice cream machines in the bathroom. Oh no. Our bathroom just has a toilet, a sink, and a shower in it. How disappointing. And every Sunday for the past couple months, I've been forced to sit here while Mama does my hair.

Mama means well, I always know that, but she has no idea what she's doing. She's been my mama for most of my life, almost as long as I can remember, but there are some things she just doesn't understand. Lately, it seems like she's been noticing that.

“Stop moving and grooving, please,” Mama tells me. She grabs a chunk of hair and pulls it tightly until all my curls are flat against my head. As flat as they can be, anyway. I try not to wince too much, but Mama always sees through me. She grunts, and finally lets go of my ponytail. She has that same face she always has whenever she’s frustrated and doesn’t want me to notice. She turns away and tries to cover her face with her hand, sighing.

“Can you just put your hair in a puff for me, please?”

I tell her I will, and she leaves the bathroom.

I’ve been with Mama since I was five years old. She has always taken me to a hair salon to get my hair done. She says I have too much hair for her to handle and that the “nice ladies at the shop” will make me beautiful. And then Daddy left and Mama decided that it was best we start “saving up for my college fund.” That was total crap, and she just didn’t want to tell me that she didn’t have any more money.

Mama and I are driving to see Grandpa today. I can tell how stressed she is. She and Daddy have been apart for only a few months and she’s still pretending like it doesn’t bother her. But Mama used to keep her hair real nice and her clothes dry-cleaned, even when Daddy told her we couldn’t afford that anymore. Now, she’s given up entirely and I just don’t get it. When Daddy left, I thought we’d finally get the mansion she wanted, but the exact opposite happened and how lame is that? She seems too sad to try anymore. Now, her hair falls lazily across her face and her clothes are just regular clothes, the kind that my mama’s old friends made fun of other women for wearing.

Mama says Grandpa is dying of something. I can’t remember what she says it is. I don’t know my Grandpa very well, but he always pretends like he knows me and loves me so much. It is something that’s never made sense to me. Grandpa doesn’t even know me. Every time he sees me, all he does is talk about random things I didn’t ask him about. He also mumbles a lot and talks up to the sky, like he’s expecting God to talk back. Frankly, I think Daddy should’ve paid for a psychological evaluation, but Daddy told me to stop being rude after I’d said that.

Grandpa’s condition has gotten worse in the last couple of weeks, so Mama thought it would be good to see him before he dies. But I don’t want to go because hospitals are weird and smell like something I don’t even know how to describe. And everyone is always sad in hospitals. Have you ever been to a hospital where people are actually happy? Like not happy to see family

or to leave the hospital, but like the kind of happy you'd be on a roller coaster at Six Flags? Anyway, what I really want is to go to the movies with Kaley and Grace this weekend, but I had to tell them I couldn't. I felt bad because we've been planning for this weekend for a while now. We had it all figured out, and it would have been amazing. It was going to be our last weekend all together this summer. Kaley is going to a music camp where she'll be with other kids who play the cello and clarinet and all those other fancy instruments. Grace is going to her family's beach house in Southampton, New York. Grace says she's not happy to go to that beach house because her family's Miami beach house is way better. So we're all really bummed to be leaving each other.

Mostly, though, I'm bummed because I'm not going anywhere. We try to go on a vacation every summer like everyone else, but Daddy warned us last year that this wouldn't be happening anymore. Things had been "shuffled" around at work, and he wasn't going to be working at that office anymore. He'd applied for another job, but I remember hearing Mama yell at him for not applying to the ones that paid as much. So, I'd gathered we were poor, though Mama told me repeatedly at the beginning of the year to never say that again.

I pull my hair back in a puff, like Mama had asked, but she still wants to play around with it. She tightens the puff back so much that my hair snaps the tie that was holding it together and, immediately, my hair falls out into the afro she'd been trying to disguise all morning.

"Mama! Seriously?" I scream. Just like that, my perfect puff is gone. I stop myself from rolling my eyes because she hates when I do that.

"Lower your voice when you speak to me," she says, glaring at me. "Let me fix it."

I grab a ponytail holder from her purse and begin putting the afro back into place. Mama's hair is much thinner and straighter and all-round prettier than mine, so her ponytail holders break more easily on my hair than my scrunchies. But this is all we have. As I grab her ponytail holder, I look at Mama. She's so pretty. Fair-skinned and blonde and blue-eyed. That's what everyone likes, right? It's beautiful. She's beautiful, even though she no longer looks the same as she did a few months ago. I wonder a lot about why Mama never had kids. I mean she has me, duh, but I can't stop thinking about why she never had her own kids, her own *actual* kids.

They would've looked just as pretty as her, I bet.

Mama apologizes as we walk into the hospital, but I don't say anything. I feel like everyone is staring at me. My hair looks stupid because I can't put it back into the perfect puff it was in before, and Mama has left my puff crooked and my baby hairs poking out. They look like a bunch of tiny ringlets partying across my head.

As we walk up to Grandpa's room, Mama tries to brush her hair down with her fingers. She adjusts her sweater so it doesn't cover her chest as much. Then, she applies lip gloss a few times. She normally wears bright red or pink lipstick, with her hair curled and her heels matching her dress perfectly. I was so jealous of her wardrobe, but shortly after Daddy left, she got rid of all of those clothes.

Mama finishes primping by the time we get to Grandpa's room. As we walk in, the smell hits me first. Grandpa looks about as sick as I thought he would be. There are a lot of tubes leading to bags with different colored liquids. Mama kisses him on the cheek as we enter and he wakes up, smiling. Mama would have described it as a Cheshire Cat smile. She said I used to smile like that when she first got me.

"Where's that beautiful ebony granddaughter of mine?" Grandpa says, looking almost right at me. I look up at Mama who pushes me forward a little bit. I hate when Grandpa calls me his ebony granddaughter. He never calls any of my cousins that. I mean, I *know* why he doesn't, but it still doesn't make it any less irritating.

I hear footsteps behind me before getting lifted into the air and twirled around. Before I can even see his face, I smell Daddy's cologne. It's the kind my Mama used to say was her favorite. I grin and cackle out loud as he twirls me. I can't control how hard I'm laughing and laugh even louder when he stops twirling me and starts tickling me. Though a little embarrassed, even Mama can't help but smile.

"Hi, Francis," Mama says to Daddy. She used to call him Franky when we all lived together, but she stopped that after he moved out. Mama laughs a little more with us before saying, "Okay, okay. Put her down." Daddy used to swing me around like that all the time. But now I'm getting bigger and taller, so the spins aren't as quick as they used to be. I still love them. I don't think I have many left. He always told me I'd grow up to be tired of getting twirled, but that hasn't happened yet.

"Can I speak with you a second, Francis?" Suddenly all the happiness I feel just evaporates at Mama's words. I hate hearing Mama say Daddy's full

name. It's not like he's suddenly calling her "Jessica," so I don't get why she has to make the change. It's so stupid.

They leave the room and I'm left with Grandpa. I wish I was with them, hearing whatever argument they are having. I move towards Grandpa and sit beside him on the bed. He smiles, like I'm someone else.

"I dated a black woman once you know," Grandpa says. I don't know what to say so I say nothing. "She had an afro kind of like you. She looked like you a little bit too, now that I think about it."

I cringe away from him. "Grandpa, that's gross!" He laughs as if he's said nothing wrong.

"No, no. It's not gross. I always liked black women. We were like chocolate and cream, me and Muriel. Miss that broad. She rolled well with the motion of the ocean if you know what I mean, squirt." He coughs.

"Ew, Grandpa. That's disgusting."

He chuckles some more until he coughs again. His thick cough sounds like he's gasping for air. I grab him some water and slide the cup in his hand.

"What are you? Nigerian? Dominican?"

"What?" Then I think about it for a second. "Grandpa, those are two entirely different places." I think about it again. "They aren't even on the same continent."

"How the hell am I supposed to know that? *I'm* not black."

I was already tired and bored of Grandpa. I don't wish death upon him or anything, but I really want to go home. I have stuff to do. I have a life, and a dream for what my life can be, and this is not it.

I'm also not even sure if I believe my grandpa. Daddy says Grandpa and Grandma have been married for basically a billion years so I don't know what lady Grandpa is talking about. Grandma died two years ago, and I doubt Grandpa was lively enough to *get it on* with some other lady.

"Well how come you didn't marry her if she was so special, Grandpa?"

"Who says I didn't?" he laughs. I figure he's slipping into one of his moments. "She was a star, is what she was. A beautiful, cute, funny star. And she had a great ass. But she was black."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I wonder.

"How old are you? Like eight or nine?"

I lose control of my face for a second and roll my eyes. If Mama was around, she'd be furious. "I'm almost fourteen, Grandpa. I'm going to high school next year. I'm basically a woman. I can't believe you'd think I'm a little

kid." I know why he did, though. Mama and Daddy adopted me nine years ago so that was all he could remember.

"Okay, whatever. You know, I marched on Washington? Dr. King was right in my face! Well, maybe not that close. I don't remember all that well, screw it. But I'd never seen so many black people in my life. It was a masterpiece! An actual masterpiece." I fear Grandpa doesn't know what he's talking about anymore. "Look, I couldn't marry a black woman, though. Wasn't legal anyways. She'd always been my lady, though. But being black was too hard on her and us." I think about the annoying puff of hair that I have to untangle later and realize that Grandpa's right.

Even though I'm not entirely sure I believe him, he's dying, so I figure I'll play along. "That's kind of stupid, you know."

He looks at me, a little surprised but doesn't say anything, so I continue. "That's a stupid reason not to marry someone. You said you thought she was pretty or whatever. And she made you laugh. I used to have a crush on Henry Carrington, but he's a tenth grader, so that sucks. Anyway, if I wanted to marry him and he wanted to marry me, I'd just do it. Everyone is so lame to say it's too hard. Like, who cares? If you liked her as much as you say, you should've just married her."

Grandpa grins and then he's silent, opening a package of crackers that had been sitting by his table. He offers me one and I take it. It's so silent in the room, all you can hear is our chewing.

Finally, he asks, "You the only black kid in your school?"

"Nope. There's Kendrick Osmond, Natalie LeDuc, Owen Haskin...oh and I think Brittany Barron is half."

"Shut up, would you? I'm telling you something important here." I ignore the strong urge to remind him that he had asked me the question.

"Now you're my granddaughter and I love you, kid, I really do, but you'll always be my black granddaughter, you know? Not to me, but to everyone. Your mother and father...they got you how long ago? Still always be their black daughter."

I'm mad because I'm not mad at Grandpa. My mama's old friends used to ask her to remind them where she adopted me from. They asked her how she could possibly do my hair and my mama used to pretend she did it all on her own.

And people stare at me. That's the worst of it. The idiots at school ask me about my parents, my biological parents as if they'd been crack-addicts. I

tell them I don't know and then they say I'll be a crack-addict one day. I have to remind them I can never be a crack-addict if I don't do crack. Then I push them against their lockers and walk away. Kaley and Grace told me I was iconic for doing that.

Still, I can't help but think that Grandpa's right. He's stupid, sure, but he's right. Stupid idiots like him are always right and how annoying is that?

"Being black is going to suck, kid. I love you too much not to at least offer a way out."

I stand up and back away from Grandpa's bed. Not because I'm scared of him. But I go to public school, so I know what a threat sounds like when I hear one. I look out the door for my parents, but I don't see them. They're probably fighting about something stupid that no one cares about except them.

"Will you relax? I meant that, there's a way you don't have to be like," he pauses and gestures to me. "Like *that* anymore."

Somewhere in my laughter I'm not sure how much I understand what he's saying, but if I'm right and he's actually talking about somehow changing me, he's dumber than I thought.

"Kids love to laugh at old people. I used to laugh at those old fucks too. But then I became an old fuck. Now look at the shit I have to deal with. An old fuck who can't breathe."

"Grandpa, Mama says you shouldn't curse that much."

"God gives you a pass to curse as much as you want when you're about to meet him." He coughs again and breathes in deeply. I get him another glass of water because he finished the other one pretty quickly. He takes my hand and I resist just shrugging it away. He really *is* losing it. "Listen to me, kid. I'm serious. Get a strand of your mother's hair. Get a strand of your father's hair and then take one of your own. You put them in a cup and swirl them together and I do the rest." He points a frail looking thumb at his chest and pumps it out like he's Superman.

I stare at him, silently, for a second. He's being silly and I'm sure Grandpa has been hit on the head many times throughout his wilder years, but I've never heard of anyone doing that before, so how in the world can it be that my Grandpa has found a way to change the way you are?

Besides, my parents adopted me nine years ago and I've loved them every day since. I don't need some weird, probably not even real, crazy potion Grandpa wants me to have.

"I'd hate to see my favorite granddaughter unhappy. Well I guess I won't see it, since I'm on my way out, huh?" He chuckles to himself. I feel sad and I can't tell if it is because he's dying or because he just called me his favorite granddaughter.

"Just think about it, kid."

We sit in silence together for a few more minutes until my parents come back. I promise myself not to think about Grandpa's insane offer. So I don't think about it. I text Kaley and Grace in our group text all night. They're having fun on their last weekend and send me pictures of them together in Kaley's parents' basement. That basement is my favorite place in the world because of how many little figurines her parents have in there. They collect them or something and each one is like a million dollars. There's a Barbie figurine collection that Kaley says her mama got for seven-hundred dollars. Insane.

They're having so much fun and I want to join them. They offer to FaceTime me into the movie they're watching, but I decide to go to bed early once we're back home. We're going back to Grandpa tomorrow and I want to be well-rested in order to see him again. He exhausts me, you know? I try not to think about being black. I just kind of live. My mama and daddy are white but, most of the time, I don't think about that when I see them. I don't think I do, anyway. I guess I just think that if it doesn't matter to them, it shouldn't matter to me.

But then I keep thinking about the little moments where I can tell my mama is really struggling. She doesn't know how to do my hair and she can't take me to her relatives in Mississippi (because they're racist) and she doesn't understand why I hate when she calls me her "chocolate drop." Not only is it embarrassing, I just don't like it. But I don't know how to say I don't like it, so I ignore it. I love Mama but she's struggling and sad. Ever since she and Daddy split up and it's just been the two of us, she's felt so upset about little things. And, if I'm being honest, I wonder how different things would be if I was their white daughter. What if I was actually their kid? Like what if my hair were blonde like Mama's and I had her sparkly blue eyes? Or maybe I'd look like my daddy and have wavy, dark hair and have his brown eyes and a skin, only a little darker than Mama's. It's stupid to even think that our lives could be better if I was white, but my dumb grandpa made me think about it. So I don't know if that's what led me to Mama's bedroom or if I just let Grandpa get into my head too much.

Mama's sleeping in her bed that seems too big for her now that Daddy is gone. She looks peaceful. I think about a couple months ago when she started selling her clothes. Then she sold some shoes. She took hold of some of Daddy's things and sold them too. They went to random consignment stores and she had sold them for much cheaper than they were worth, according to her. Then, Mama stopped going to the salon and said I had to stop as well. And I did. And then Mama started doing my hair for real, and every time she did, she looked frustrated and angry with herself and me.

And about a month ago, we ran into my old hairdresser at the hair store or whatever. Mama was trying to pick up products for me, and my hairdresser lady came up to her and told her off. She said people like my mama adopt kids like me to make themselves feel good, and not because they actually love us. I told Mama that it was stupid of that lady to say that, and completely untrue, but Mama was hurt. She never told me why the lady had said that to her. She yelled at me later that day over something dumb that I don't remember, saying she didn't understand me. At the time I didn't know what she meant by that, but now I can't help but wonder if she doesn't understand me because I'm not like her. Because I didn't come from her, and I don't know who I came from.

It's not like I care about what mean things my hairdresser said to Mama. I really don't. I know my mama isn't like that and I know she loves me, but maybe if I was like Mama, if I wasn't black, her life would be easier. Maybe mine would be too.

Mama, of course, would never admit any of that, but it's totally obvious.

I walk up to our hall bathroom and find Mama's comb and take one of her hair strands. Daddy's old brush is still in the cabinet too. He forgot it there when he took the rest of his things and left. There are a couple of strands of hair on them, but not as many as on Mama's comb. I fold a few pieces of toilet paper together and place the pieces of hair in there. I pull a small strand of my own hair from the back of my head and place it next to Mama's. I fold the toilet paper back up. I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but I want it just in case.

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I think I've been asleep longer, but as Mama wakes me up, I realize it's only been a few hours. She normally doesn't interrupt my beauty sleep for nothing. And judging by how fast she's moving, I'm right. Daddy stands outside of the house, waiting for us in the car. Mama says Grandpa's condition has gotten worse. They're really quiet on the way to the hospital, which is how I know it must be serious. She puts her hand on his. It feels weird to watch. It's been some time since I've seen my parents be so affectionate. Usually, if they aren't fighting, it's because they aren't in the same room.

But Grandpa is Daddy's father. And Mama always liked Grandpa, even if he is weird.

Mama hasn't said anything, but I feel like pulling my hair back into a puff. I'm sure she doesn't care what I look like at the moment. She's worried about Grandpa and I understand that. Still, I felt like making a perfect puff, if not for her, then maybe for Grandpa or maybe for myself.

Daddy parks the car in a close spot to the hospital, but doesn't get out right away like he usually does. He used to always get out of the car to open the door for Mama, but right now, he just slumps forward and rests his head against the steering wheel. Mama looks at me for a second and then looks at Daddy. She runs her fingers through his hair the same way she used to before she stopped calling him Franky. Daddy has wavy hair that Mama used to say was the hair of the gods.

Daddy cries against the steering wheel. I step out of the car and walk into the hospital myself. I know where Grandpa's room is and I don't feel like I'm supposed to be in the car anymore. Mama and Daddy never would have let me walk anywhere alone in the middle of the night, even the short three-minutes it took to get to Grandpa's room. But, that's the first time I've seen them in so long not wanting to kill each other. And, Mama nodded in approval when I'd opened the door.

As I enter Grandpa's room, he looks so much worse than what he looked like earlier, but he notices me as soon as I walk in. I feel strange for holding the folded toilet paper in my hands all of a sudden. And I weirdly want him to say something offensive or silly to me.

"You look like crap, Grandpa. Like even worse than last time," I tell him.

Grandpa tries to laugh when I walk closer to his bed. There's a beeping in the room that could only be the sound of his heart growing fainter and fainter.

"Kids these days are real pieces of shit," he chokes out, gasping more than yesterday. He looks at my hand. "Got the hair, do you?"

All the strands look so close together on this stupid piece of toilet paper. "What do you do with them?" I ask. He doesn't answer me though. I sit on his bed and look at how little he is. He leaves a lot of space in this hospital bed.

"When they first said they were adopting you, I thought they were idiots."

"Seriously, Grandpa?"

He laughs, but not as fully as he did yesterday, which, now that I think about it, wasn't as full as the last time I saw him.

"Relax, relax. I'm kidding. Well, not really. They really sucked when they first got you. They didn't know a damn thing about babies. They thought you were so cute and sweet so maybe they thought adopting you would be like adopting a golden retriever?"

Against my will, I feel myself laughing with him.

"You're so weird," and I can tell I'm smiling.

"You know they'd cry for you the same?" he says. I don't speak, so he continues. "Black daughter or white daughter. They'd cry for you the same, kid." He's breathless and coughs for a moment, like even speaking takes a lot out of him.

I hold the folded pieces of toilet paper in my hand.

Grandpa falls asleep, so I don't bother him with them at that moment. I lie down beside him, resting my head on his shoulder. He's so small, and I fit easily. He doesn't move much, but he does hold my hand, a move that makes him wince. It's such a weirdly nice gesture from him, that I wish he was saying something wild or annoying instead.

As I lie with him, I feel like I'm crying.

Somewhere between the time I fell asleep and the time I woke up, Grandpa died. Daddy filled out some paperwork for the hospital and Mama sat there, waiting for him. I'd been moved from Grandpa's bed to the hospital waiting room where I lay across multiple chairs.

My head rests in Mama's lap. She's stroking my hair, struggling to run her fingers through the thick mess. I don't want to move because this is the most comfortable I've felt in a long time. I curl up against Mama and can't help but smile when I feel the folded piece of toilet paper hidden in the pocket of my jacket.