

Root to Rise

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Cleaning out some cupboards in my mother's house, I found a stash of pictures taken twenty years ago in my East Village apartment of my *kına gecesi*, a traditional Turkish night-before-the-wedding-party. Observing a few shots of my mother and aunt who were in their 50s at the time, I thought to myself, "Look how young they are!" Even though today, I am about the same age as they were in those pictures, I never look in the mirror and exclaim, "Look how young I am!"

Over the years, a series of minor modifications have accrued to create a subtle effect: rosacea in my cheeks, a few blemishes that have scarred instead of faded, deepening nasolabial folds. The changes in my face are visible to all, as are the extra pounds that seem to have infiltrated my molecules, despite my vigorous efforts at the gym and yoga studio. Although I still look pretty good, I am... just... older. So far, I have eschewed the benefits of microderm abrasion, Botox, or liposuction. Further, I have embraced the most avoidable of aging's unrelenting signs: I have let myself go gray.

Or I should say, I have stopped coloring my hair, which has been going gray without my consent for many years. My black hair would show its silver roots just a few weeks after a dye application, sending me rummaging in my medicine cabinet for my array of touch-up products. One such item was a spray; another was a mascara-like tool with a dual wand function. Having seen *Erin Brockovich* more than once, I had little confidence that the chemicals in said concoctions might not be gradually feeding tumors or accelerating dementia. But for a long time, I continued to apply them straight to my scalp, which I have been told is not far from my brain.

Usually, I would dye my hair at home, but I sometimes splurged on a professionally applied "natural tint" which my stylist insisted was healthier than the stuff I would purchase at the drug store. But salon coloring was not only expensive, it was also excruciatingly painful as it was served alongside a hefty dose of Long Island suburban salon banter.

I had been complaining about hair coloring for years, promising myself that I would stop when I turned 50—just as I plan to resume smoking pot at age 70, after a 35-year hiatus. My mother thinks I'm crazy, of course. About the hair, not the pot. Actually, I still haven't confessed to her about my teenage pot smoking. One thing at a time.

My 76-year-old mother still sees me as a cute little 16-year-old (which makes sense, since I am short and she seems to envision herself as a 40-year-old), so she doesn't understand why I would forswear hair coloring, which is such an easy way to maintain a more youthful look. When my mother was a girl in Turkey, 50-year-old women were crones, wizened by years of toil and

turmoil. They were wrinkled, frequently toothless, and, definitely, gray. The fact that they wore hijabs in public was a small salve to the ego.

I don't know how to explain my determination to go gray to mother, since I'm not fundamentally against cosmetics or the myriad forms of human body modification. I am a lover of eyeliner, earrings, and elegant plumage for all. The more the better. In ancient Egypt, nearly everyone wore eyeliner, men and women alike, and I have been trying to convince *everyone* that *everyone* looks better with a little mascara.

Where I live, a majority of women color their hair well into their later years. At my workplace right now, I can think of only two or three who are youngish but have gone significantly gray or silver. Men are not coloring their hair. Those who are lucky enough to still have hair don't seem to care what the hell color it is.

And the trend, perhaps already passed, of young women dying their hair in shades of silver and gray, isn't much help, since no one would ever confuse me with a hot 25-year-old with an Instagram-ready silver Marie Antoinette updo.

Yet despite my determination to go natural, I had my reservations.

A colleague let her hair go gray a few years ago. When the new school year started, I was surprised to see that she had gone back to the bottle. She explained that she did so after being out with her cousin (a man eight years her senior) and being mistaken for his mother.

I recently had a similar experience. I was at a party, sitting with a man about the age of 80. After telling me a few amusing anecdotes about teaching art at a Bronx Middle School in the seventies, he took a sip of his Chardonnay and asked, "What did you do?"

At first, his use of the past tense confused me. I wasn't sure if he was inquiring about something that he thought I had just done, such as fart or scratch myself indiscreetly. Then I realized that by "did," he meant "work," as in, "What [work] did you do," as in, he thought I was a retired person!

What? I am a small 50-year-old. I was wearing a groovy top. I have a nose ring. I do yoga and lift weights regularly. I am a fit, funky woman. Didn't he see that? No. He only saw my gray hair and to him, that denoted retirement.

After a moment of confusion, I had to chuckle to myself, concluding that he probably needed cataract surgery.

On the bright side, my decision to go gray has been generating compliments from random strangers. A woman stalked me in Home Depot, finally catching up to me amongst the light bulbs, congratulating me on my success at walking around in public with gray hair. How great was my accomplishment! As though I had swum the English Channel. Another time, a woman surreptitiously snapped my picture on the F train, but when I caught her eye, she explained that

she wanted to show it to her husband to convince him how good it can look. I smiled and said, “Good Luck,” but was thinking, *what, do you need permission?*

Literature and film abound with critical hair scenes, from the tragic symmetry of Maupassant’s “The Gift of the Magi” to the abomination of Olivia Newton-John’s make-over in *Grease*. As a kid, I watched hours of cartoons, including *Josie and the Pussycats*. No one could understand why Alexandra was my favorite. I loved how her evil was marked not only by her (at that time, rarely heard) polysyllabic name, but also by the noncompliant zig-zag of silver streaked across her black hair.

In Meg Wolitzer’s novel *The Female Persuasion*, there is a scene where Faith Frank, a 70-year-old professional feminist who runs a women’s foundation, is in a salon getting her hair dyed. When her 26-year-old protegee meets her there, Faith Frank is moved to explain why she is getting her hair dyed, as if doing so betrayed her feminist goals: “I just want to feel like myself.” Indeed.

I try to keep aging and graying in a mindful balance. When I go to yoga class on Sunday mornings, the instructor tells us to “Root to Rise” as we go from one vinyasa to the next. The phrase has always struck me as a motto to live by. Root to Rise. I will do so, whatever the color of the roots. Gray, black or perhaps a gutsy slash of magenta.

To “feel like myself” today, I choose gray.