

Skin Deep

## I Have Taken on My Daughter's Hair and Won



Jillian Tamaki

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#)

Published: March 22, 2007

OFTEN, the women let out a little gasp. I look up, a hair twisty dangling from my mouth, a clump of my 5-year-old daughter's hair clenched in one fist, a comb in the other, ready for attack. She squirms on the bench in the family locker room at the local Y, freshly showered after a swim class and bracing for her hair appointment with me, her father, hellbent on taming those tresses.

Skip to next paragraph "Wow, you are really good," one approving mother says one morning as my fingers weave three strands into a tight braid. I nod thanks and press on, fussing with another braid as I demand again and again, "Lyla, keep still for heaven's sake."

As Lyla and I depart, the receptionist at the counter coos. "Who did your hair, sweetie," she asks, knowing the answer. "Daddy," Lyla says matter-of-factly.

“Nice job, Dad,” says the receptionist. In another context, the look she gives me might land us in trouble with my wife.

The gushing, I have noticed, is particularly heavy from black women like the Y receptionist, as well as from family and friends, who no doubt appreciate the challenge of combing, brushing and braiding hair like Lyla’s. Hers is a glorious mix of kinks, knots, semicurls and straight strands.

I can’t imagine my wife garnering these compliments, and when I boast to her of my female fans, she confirms the suspicion. Nobody compliments her braiding when she takes Lyla into the girls’ or women’s locker room.

I’ve been doing Lyla’s hair since she has had enough hair to do, receiving my first lessons from my wife and subjecting Lyla to my continued training by my sister, mother-in-law and other female relatives. Combing and brushing and, most important, braiding her hair seemed another way to help out and participate in the joys of having a daughter.

But Lyla’s locks have given me a closer glimpse into the angst, not to mention politics, that is black women’s hair. Sure, I have ridden the highs and lows of my wife’s hair-care odyssey. Go natural? Braids? Relaxer? A weave? Cut it all off? She has tried almost everything and been stressed about it all along the way. Does having a relaxer to straighten natural kinks bow to white society’s notion of good hair? Do free-form ’fros and braids with fake hair extensions look “professional” enough?

This was all fairly abstract to me until I had the chance to participate in the look of a black female’s hair, my daughter’s. I was introduced to the panorama of twisties, barrettes, hair and scalp conditioner (basically hair grease), brushes for every occasion and narrow- and wide-tooth combs.

This little person has her own basket of hair stuff. Her dad, hair shorn conservatively close, pretty much steps out of the shower and calls it a day. But with each trail of the comb through her hair, each braid I snarl tight, I have a better understanding of what her looks convey.

As I read Bell Hooks's children's book "Happy to Be Nappy," I silently look for the illustration that most closely resembles Lyla's hair, never quite finding it and mildly disturbed that such a book is even necessary. After her mother took Lyla for her first haircut (a trim really, because her mother says she will never cut her hair) and had it straightened — as is the way of many of our relatives — we tried not to cringe too much when Lyla exulted over her new look. I felt relieved when she seemed equally excited — well, almost — at the return of her tight curls after her first poststraightening swim.

With some limitations, we give Lyla a say in her hairstyle. One braid? Two, three, four? Part in the middle or on the side? Sometimes she prefers to let it all hang out, curly, frizzy and wild. When we eventually braid it again, fretting over those knots and dirt accumulating in the thicket, I wonder if we are then crimping her style, making a political statement?

Who knew hair could be this complicated?

I'm sure I am not the only man going through this, but it often feels lonely. I never played with my sister's dolls as a child, beyond occasionally beheading them. But perhaps doing Lyla's hair taps into some deep-buried curiosity about women's hair that I like to think lots of men secretly share.

Or maybe not. Friends and relatives, black and otherwise, do not seem to relish taking on their daughter's hair — some refuse, declaring it too difficult or feminine — though I credit my cousin's husband, Kirk, with some inspiration.

Years ago on a visit, I looked at him somewhat astonished as he broke out the comb and brush and in minutes weaved his daughter's hair into cute little braids, clearly not for the first time. Well, if Kirk could do it ...

When the time came, there I was standing over my own daughter, trying to remember and put in practice what my wife, mother, mother-in-law, sister and sister-in-law all taught me. A female friend

gave me a picture-filled book on braiding, but it has humbled me more than anything else.

Still, from all these sources I distilled my own approach, including, most tricky of all, mastering that braiding technique so that my fingers, too, look like some earnest spider quickly spinning a rope.

My wife watches me do Lyla's hair, still looking like the master observing the pupil. She listens to my occasional boasts, amused and a little annoyed. Add it to the list of things women do with little fuss that practically earn men a medal.

Yet I could relate when I read in Esquire last October that Brad Pitt endorsed Carol's Daughter hair products for his adopted daughter, Zahara.

"For white people who might be having a little trouble with black-person hair, Carol's Daughter is a fantastic hair product," he said, earning him a mention in the Say What? column in Essence. "We got it for Z. Now her hair has this beautiful luster. And it smells nice, too."

Maybe a clumsy way to say: I have taken on my black daughter's hair and won. But I know the feeling of triumph.

Me, Brad, Kirk. We'll accept a little credit, thank you, for taking on those knots. The ones in our daughters' hair, too.