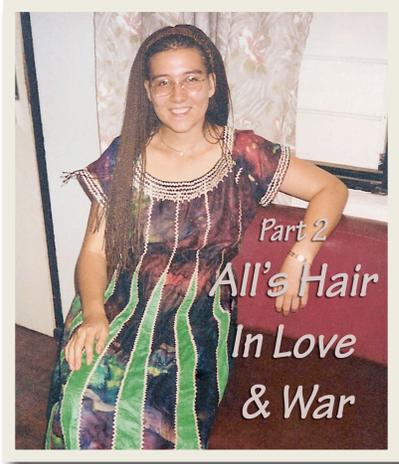


Episode 5: Part 2-*All's Hair in Love and War*

By Amber Lockridge



This was the best method I had found so far to pass the time. Consequently, I was not pleased to have my reverie interrupted by a loud man stepping in from the street, shouting ecstatically.

“*Oboroni!*” Jubilantly trouncing over to me he asked, “*O te den*” or how are you, but dragging out the words in comical fashion. I was not interested in conversation but neither could I let my ego go unasserted.

“*Bo ko,*” I grumbled, “Okay”.

“*Ei!*” he cried, “*O te Fante! O te Fante!*” This followed by an idiotic little dance directly in front of me. Who was this guy? I looked to the girls still pulling unmercifully at my scalp but they only laughed. “*E te Fante a?*” he now asked me. “*E te Fante a? At'se? At'se?*”

“*Yes, I understand Fante*”, I replied in kind. There was another repetition of the antelope dance.

“*What's your name?*” he inquired.

“*Kukuwa*”

“*Kukuwa? You are Kukuwa?*” His explosive laughter made me cringe. “*Where are you from?*”

“*America.*”

Crap, I thought as I watched the excitement bounce between his eyes. The truth had slipped out before I could stop myself.

“*Eh! Sister Kukuwa, you are a very beautiful American girl.*”

I peered at him skeptically from behind my sweaty mass of hair. I couldn't imagine that the parts of me currently visible were all that appealing to look at. Besides which, I didn't like the direction the conversation was heading. True to my suspicions, he began to inquire my age and parents' names, trying all the while to get hold of my hand. I decided to try humor to discourage him. At the first mention of the word *wife*, I cried out in the native tongue.

“*I don't understand Fante! I can't speak it at all.*” One of the girls, assuming I really didn't understand, leaned over to explain it in English.

“*He will marry you.*”

“*Mennte Fante!*” I cried again, “*I don't understand Fante.*”

“You understand English?” he asked.

“Oh, no. I don’t understand English either”. Everyone was laughing so hard, half the girls stopped plaiting. I decided to play my advantage. “*I don’t want to talk*” I scolded him fiercely in Akan. “*I’m tired. Go outside.*” I pointed firmly to the door. With a shocked but amused grin on his face, my would-be suitor stepped tentatively towards the exit. “Go,” I cried. “*Go outside*”.

Relieved and laughing, we all watched him disappear. I settled back into my slouch, listening to the female voices chattering excitedly at they returned to their work.

Just as I was resuming my trance, a form burst through the door.

“*Adua*”, the same cried. I put my hand to my head.

“*Kukuwa*” I corrected him with a mumble. He rushed forward to grasp my exposed hand.

“You are too beautiful. You will take me to America, eh?” he stroked the hand.

“I can’t” I replied, replaying a conversation I had already had too many times to take seriously.

“You don’t want to? You don’t like me?” he gazed at me, unreadable.

“No, no, no,” I lied. “I can’t take you to America. I’m too young.

My government won’t recognize me until I’m 21.” This was a blatant lie but it had worked previously to navigate the fine line on this issue between offending the suitor and encouraging his attention. Had she been here, my host mother would have chased the man from the store with every manner of loud reproach. In this case, however, the blankness of his eyes and tightness of his grip showed my words had failed to sway him.

“Oh, why, *oboroni*? You are too beautiful. You must take me to America”. “You have a boyfriend?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s Ghanaian”. He continued to stare mildly, stroking my captured hand, unconvinced or unconcerned. My lies had failed. Trapped and in pain, I could endure no more.

“*Sisters, please help me.*” I begged of my captors “*I am tired*”. This time, they took pity on me and shooed him out of the store and I settled once again into the timeless rhythms of breathing.

It grew easier as the sun went down. The heat faded away and the strangling halo of wispy mesh dwindled to a select section in the front. I caught sight of the antelope man from time to time, glancing hopefully into the shop, but he did not come in again to try and woo me. Even the girls seemed to have lightened up the pressure on my head. Perhaps less in response to my small cries and more in startled self-correction as each managed to rip their own obruni hair souvenir straight out of my scalp. And no doubt a general numbness of head and heart descended like a grateful veil to wrap me up in a timeless stupor. I stopped checking my watch.

I dozed and drooled and let my body be moved to-and-fro by the more settled and coordinated rhythms of my sister stylists. At some point, I grabbed for my book and discovered that my tolerance for arrogance was much improved with the reduction in general frustration and so I read for several hours.

The blue-trousered woman did not stay all the time at my head. I do not know if she tired of her failure to crush my commitment to this process or if she was merely disgusted by the inability of my scalp to withstand the steady force of her calloused and angular technique. Instead, she popped up occasionally in my peripheral vision to utter a dissatisfied clucking noise, chastise a girl in Fante and reiterate her dominance over my head for a braid or two before disappearing again.

When they reached the very top of my head, well into the darkness now, progress came to a definite halt. The snarled mass of hair that had amused me earlier had solidified into a tangled ball of hardened wax, a fact that somehow managed to startle them. They pulled and teased at it with combs; our blue madam came over to tug at it aggressively but to no avail. Jaded as I was by this point, I chuckled internally for the pure spite of it. For this, at last, was proof positive that despite my sister Ama's assurances, and my torturer's confident attitudes, these ladies clearly had no idea how to deal with a white woman's hair. They had backed themselves into a corner and the sheer disaster of the results was delightful in its absurdity.

Yet even in the face of the kind of chewed bubble-gum catastrophe often solved in American suburbia only by the cold application of scissors, they did not give up. Even the circus master redeemed herself somewhat in my eyes by commanding a brilliant operation to immerse the top of my head in very hot water and thus melt the wax out of it.

And it worked! A patient thirty minutes later and the seemingly inevitable vision of my future baldness washed away into wet strands of combable hair. These were quickly, triumphantly, twisted up into brown synthetic and added to the Medusa's nest of slithery plaits covering the whole of my head. Finally, finally the 13-hour ordeal had ended and I stared admiringly into the mirror at my hard-won African style. The girls complimented me at length.

"Wo ho ye fe" they said. "You are beautiful". "Obruni, no ho ye fe," they said to each other. I stretched and flexed, reassuring myself that someday I would again feel the presence of my rear end but for now it was worth it.

Clearly it was far past the typical closing of the shop and everyone was making ready to go home. As promised, someone flagged me a taxi and gave the driver instruction to take me to my house. I thanked them all many times on my way out.

"Medassie. Medassie."

As I stepped across the threshold, one of the girls handed me a pick-comb. I looked at her inquiringly.

“For the itching,” she said but disappeared again before I could ask what she meant.



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