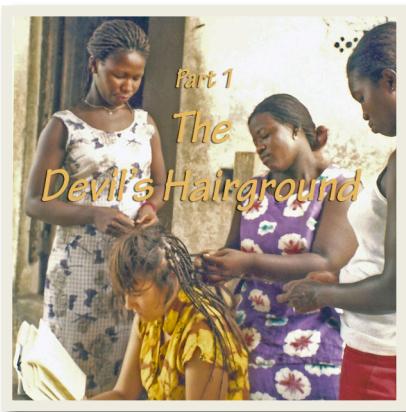


## Episode 4: Part 1-The Devil's Hairground

By Amber Lockridge



It started off well enough: a nice washing and drying, a little curling and waxing. I chose two colors of synthetic hair, called mesh, for the salon ladies to weave into long plaits on my head. They motioned me to a small stool and I threw myself onto it with a grin. Even the plaiting wasn't so painful at the back where they started. "Yes," I thought. "I can handle this. It's 8:30 am now so I should be out of here by 4:00 this afternoon." I hummed a little while two girls busily worked at the foundations of my head.

An hour later it was four girls and I was trying to read an Agatha Christie novel and keep my neck steady at the same time. My head was throbbing faintly but I didn't seem to be losing too much hair. I resisted the temptation to look at my watch.

By noon, the nature of my predicament had begun to settle upon me. It wasn't my head that hurt nearly so much as my butt. The bare wood stool was as hard as my bruised bottom was soft. I could only feel a numb and distant prickling where I thought my feet were. Six girls surrounded me like the calyx of a flower. I was encased in a mass of itchy suffocating hair down to my waist. The air outside had turned hot and with so many bodies near me, I was sweating profusely. This did not help the itching as stray hairs stuck to my arms and back. I had to suppress the urge to scream and throw them all off me.

"Breathe," I thought to myself. I remembered reading that hyperventilation was an anesthetic. "Breathe," I thought again, forcing my chest in and out, straining my neck to keep my head still against the incessant tugging from six different directions. I willed myself to ignore the sticky, dirty feeling that covered my body and returned to my book.

I was temporarily saved by the appearance of my sister in the doorway of the salon. I prayed she wasn't a heat and delirium induced mirage. How long had I been here? She motioned me to come and I gladly extricated myself, tripping only a little as the feeling worked itself back into my legs. Indiscreetly, I peeled the bands of my underwear out of the grooves they had embedded themselves in.

"Good afternoon," I said. "What are you doing here?" She informed me that she had to rush to Accra, at best a four hour journey, to get some school papers signed for another of my sisters. One of the girls would take me home and had I eaten lunch yet. I said okay, okay, and no I hadn't. She told me I could send someone across the street to buy me rice. Then she hurried off, affectionately calling out "*boroni*" and shaking her head with laughter.

I looked back at the stool. Flexing my butt cheeks, I suggested we all break for lunch. The food was heaven-sent and cool glasses of water calmed my anxiety. My endurance bolstered, I allowed for a small amount of time computation. I had been there for four hours, I must be at least half way through. As I returned resignedly to my stool, I caught sight of my head in the mirror. The reflection elicited a chuckle that might have been a guffaw if I hadn't been there all morning. My real hair was a snarly clump at the top of my head with various clips sticking out of it. The plaited portions at the back were encouraging but I was disturbed by how little ground had been covered; they hadn't even reached my ears. Nevertheless, I resumed my seat with a sigh and picked up my book.

Five minutes later, the book was finished. Curse my lack of foresight! I had brought another book but it was in my bag all the way across the room. If I wanted it, I would have to ask for it in Fante. With a deep breath, I made the attempt.

*"Me po okyo, to book yi wo bagno wo ho na fa me book fri no".*

I hoped this sounded something like "Please, put this book in that bag and bring me the other book in it." One of the women did place the book I held into my bag, probably the result of gestures and guesswork, but did not remove the second book.

Now I was really stuck. There was nothing to distract me from the pain and the agony of impatience. They had removed my glasses so I was, for any relevant purpose, blind as well. I tried meditation, sitting tall and breathing deep, but the numbness crept back into my feet. I could swear that bones were beginning to poke through the skin of my butt.

Soon I was shifting leg positions like some strange dancer. I rocked back and forth, first on one hip, then the other. I tried reflecting on pain philosophically. After all, it was only a sensation. No need for so much anxiety and repulsion. Relaxing, distancing....

*"Sister, please!"* Bleary eyed, the cry escaped my throat.

It was the woman in blue pants. I could see her just on the edge of my peripheral vision. She seemed to have more faith in the structural integrity of my head than I did. That, or she just didn't like me. Who was this woman, anyway?

All the other girls wore gold and white uniforms but for this plain-clothed sadist. Every time she started a new braid, I tensed my body. One, two, three, four. She twists a strand of mesh around a piece of hair, my scalp shrieking in agony. She pulls the piece straight out, apparently only able to work at a perpendicular to the plane of my scalp. Then, the tugging begins as she plaits the length of the hair. With all the girls tugging to different beats, I was experiencing a cacophonous musical orchestration, the devil's percussion section with blue pants commanding a shrill solo.

I lost my thoughts in this metaphor for some time. 2:00, 3:00, who could tell? I swam in a timeless daze. The only thing keeping me stationary and sane was the knowledge that it would

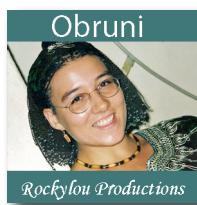
all be over soon. But as 4:00 crept closer, I grew uneasy. The girls on the right side of my head were picking at the top hairs now. But was that a tug near my left ear? Hesitation became certainty when a piece of hair just above that very ear was viciously yanked out to a 90-degree angle. One, two, three, four...blue bobbed in and out of my receptive field. I had been deceived! Misled into believing my taxi ride home was a whistle away. I shifted my legs in consternation and accidentally kicked the girl in front of me. Somewhere, Freud might have chuckled.

With a sigh, I strengthened my resolve, thinking about the awe I would soon be soaking in. Wearily, I tried again to obtain the second book from my bag. I was fortunate to receive it on the third repetition of "*Me pa okyo, fa me bag mame*". Relieved, I turned to Agatha Christie's Endless Night.

Without my glasses, I had to press the book almost up to my nose and then pull it away again as I reached the edge of the page. I tried valiantly to dissolve into the story but my head was pounding and the main character was annoyingly arrogant.

Fifteen pages in, I put the book aside in disgust. My rear squirmed of its own accord and I sighed audibly. Resting my moist chin in my damp palm, I thought I might sleep a little. I tried my cat trick. Each time I inhaled, I squeezed my eyes half shut then relaxed on the exhale. I imagined settling haughtily onto my stool and purring. I dozed in and out, chasing light daydreams.

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