

Perms Carleen had this thing with Toni perms. She shampooed us, yanked our snarls, swore at us to quit sniveling, then sat us in an assembly-line row facing away from her work station—the chrome-legged and yellow Formica-topped kitchen table—the three of us perched on the matching vinyl chairs with old bath towels draped over our shoulders, facing the window and waiting our turn. First, she scotch-taped our wet bangs to our foreheads, then with Mom’s sewing scissors snipped them straight across. Next, starting at the crown of our heads, she proceeded to carefully wrap each combed lock with a little white square of tissue paper, then tightly roll it in pink plastic rods. Finally, she poured the burning processing solution over our heads, down our backs and into our eyes, holding her head sideways so she wouldn’t pass out from the reek of ammonia, mumbling at us through a mouthful of pink rods to sit still and to hold the long white cotton strips stuck on with Vaseline tightly to our foreheads so we wouldn’t go blind. She was making us beautiful.



Claudia 1951



Betty 1951



Cathy 1956

By morning, our bangs had shrunk three inches above our eyebrows, four inches where the cowlicks were. Flat on top, the rest of our hair was so tight and curly it stuck out in triangles on each side like Bozo the Clown; only one side was always higher than the other, so it looked like our hair was on crooked. We stank for a week.

She always gave us a Toni the day before school pictures.

One year, the year I was six and Carleen wasn’t around, Mom put Betty and Claudia in charge of my hair. After leaving the barbershop, my sisters made me trail ten feet behind them in tears, saying I looked like a boy and so ugly they couldn’t be seen with me, laughing and taunting, *we don’t even know you* and calling me a *poor little orphan girl*.

However, I think my hair did look better in my school picture that year.



Cathy 1954