
The New and Improved Reggie Brown

It was the best day of Reggie's life—ever. At least that's what she'd decided when she'd gotten up that morning. Early that morning, as a matter of fact, after several hours of tossing, turning and hiding under the covers with a flashlight and a page she'd ripped out of a black hair magazine over the weekend and had been secretly carrying with her everywhere. No one but her mother had seen it. In fact, no one but her mother even knew what she was planning to do, and that made it even more exciting.

"Next stop, Monroe Street."

Reggie slipped her arms through her backpack and sat forward a little, ready to jump off the city bus the moment it stopped. The driver, who also happened to be her mother's sister, smiled at her in the mirror as the bus slowed down.

“I’ll be finishing my route early today, so your mama will pick you up instead of you taking the bus home alone. Just stay in the shop until she gets there, hear?”

“Yes, Aunt Ronnie,” Reggie nodded, stepping forward to get off the bus.

“You know, you seem mighty mighty excited about something today,” her aunt smiled, looking at Reggie suspiciously. “What’s going on, little girl?”

“Oh, nothing,” Reggie said innocently, her face breaking into a wide grin. “You’ll see,” she said, jumping down off the last step of the bus. She turned to wave once she was safely on the sidewalk in front of the beauty shop that another one of her mother’s sisters owned. She’d been going there to get her hair washed every Monday since she was five years old.

“Bye, Aunt Ronnie!” Reggie yelled as the door to the beauty shop opened and her Aunt Ernie stepped out to wave at the bus as it pulled away.

Reggie smiled, hugging the young woman. She loved all her mother’s sisters, but Ernie was by far her favorite. The youngest of the five sisters, Ernie

was definitely the coolest—in Reggie’s opinion anyway. Her style was somewhere between Lauryn Hill and Mary J. Blige, she always seemed to know the latest music and videos, she lived in a nice apartment, and she drove a really nice car. Plus, she was very popular and everyone knew and liked her. Reggie always felt extra special when she went places with her.

“How is my favorite niece today?” Ernie asked as Reggie stuck her backpack under the receptionist’s desk, which was empty today because the shop was closed on Mondays. Ernie only opened it for family then.

“I’m fine,” Reggie grinned, jumping into one of the styling chairs. She loved to swivel around in it until it made her dizzy. Then she’d get up, practically falling out of it, and stumble back and forth until the room stopped spinning.

“So,” Ernie said when Reggie had finally settled down in the chair again. “Your mama tells me we’re doing something different with your hair today.”

Reggie nodded, slowly pulling the picture from her pocket. Ernie smiled as she unfolded it.

“Now that’s definitely a different look for you, Reggie,” she said, sliding the cloth band from around Reggie’s thick afro-puff and gently pulling at her hair until it looked a little like the style the girl wore in the magazine advertisement.

“You like it?” Reggie asked, anxiously hoping she did. If Ernie said it was cool, then it was definitely cool.

“I do,” Ernie nodded. “Of course, I always like the way you wear your hair. But it’s a woman’s choice to change it whenever she wants to. Lord knows I do.”

Reggie laughed. It was true. Ernie never kept a hairstyle for very long. Everyone always joked that she never looked the same on Wednesdays or Fridays as she did on Mondays, and that it was a good thing she was a hairdresser or she’d go broke paying someone else every time she decided she needed a different look.

“Follow me, hon,” Ernie said, heading to the sinks at the other end of the room.

Any other day, Reggie loved it when Ernie took her time washing her hair, but today it seemed to take longer than ever before. She fidgeted in the

chair until Ernie finally turned the water off, wrapping her hair in a towel. Reggie hurried back to the styling chair, spinning around to face the mirror.

“Now, I wouldn’t normally use this on your hair,” Ernie explained, plugging in the blow dryer, “but since I’ve got a date tonight and you’re anxious to get out of here and show off the new and improved Reggie Brown, I think it’ll be all right just this once. Okay?”

Reggie nodded, forcing herself to close her eyes as Ernie began blow-drying her hair. She didn’t want to see it until it was all done.

“Every time I get my hands in your hair, I get jealous,” Ernie said after a while. “You don’t know how fortunate you are to have such beautiful, natural hair.”

“You have beautiful hair, too,” Reggie replied, shouting above the noise of the blow-dryer.

“It’s getting there,” Ernie said. “After years of burning it out with relaxers and dyes, it’s finally growing out nice and healthy, I guess.”

The noise of the blow-dryer stopped suddenly, and Reggie squeezed her eyes closed even tighter.

“What are you doing?” Ernie laughed, looking at her in the mirror.

“I don’t want to look until you’re all done,” Reggie replied firmly.

“Well, you’re going to love it. I’ve never straightened your hair before, have I?”

“Nope,” Reggie smiled, trying not to move as she felt the heat of the straightening comb on her scalp.

“Girl, I’m glad you’re not tender-headed. I had to stop doing Ebony’s hair after that last time she kicked me,” Ernie said, and they both laughed.

It was true. Reggie’s cousin Ebony did not like people playing in her hair. It had gotten so bad that Ernie decided to teach the girl how to wash and set her own hair. Sometimes it looked good, and sometimes it looked really *really* bad.

“Not to worry,” Ernie had said to her. “Every woman has bad hair days. That’s what hairpieces, wigs and braids are for.”

Ebony’s mother, Robbie, who was Ronnie’s twin, had decided Ebony was definitely too young for hairpieces and wigs, so Ernie taught her how to braid. After a few attempts, it turned out that

Ebony had a real talent for it and created some really beautiful hairstyles for herself. Reggie even let her braid her hair sometimes, and Ernie had been so impressed that she'd jokingly offered the young girl a job in the beauty shop. Ebony made her promise to ask her again when she turned sixteen.

Ernie didn't say much as she worked on Reggie's hair, which was fine with Reggie, who was busy daydreaming about making her big entrance at school the next day. She'd planned every last detail, even down to how wide she wanted to smile.

"Well, Reg," Ernie said finally after what seemed like an eternity. "You're all done, hon. It's a whole new you."

"What does it look like?" Reggie asked nervously.

"Open your eyes and find out for yourself, silly," Ernie laughed.

Reggie took a deep breath, gasping as she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

"Aunt Ernie, it looks better than the picture!"

“Well, you know me, Reggie. I always add a little something to make it an ‘Ernie Original.’ So you love it?”

“Yes!” Reggie cried, continuing to stare at herself in the mirror. She couldn’t believe what Ernie had done. And she couldn’t wait to show herself off at school tomorrow.

The door to the shop opened and Reggie’s mother stepped in, her eyes widening as Reggie turned to look at her.

“Wow,” she gasped. “I almost didn’t recognize my own daughter.”

“Mama, do you like it?” Reggie asked eagerly.

“Yes, sweetness, I do. Very much. You look so different with your hair straightened out. I didn’t realized it was so long,” she said.

“No, Mama,” Reggie said, moving away as her mother reached out to touch her hair. “I don’t want to mess it up.”

“So sorry. What was I thinking?” Mrs. Brown laughed, shaking her head. “Get your things together, Reggie. We’re double-parked outside and your father will not be happy if I get another ticket.”

The two women glanced at each other, stifling their laughter as Reggie crossed the room slowly, holding her head stiffly so as not to mess up her hair.

“So you’re coming by for dinner on Sunday, Ern? I’m spreading a huge feast,” Mrs. Brown smiled.

“Girl, please. When have you ever known me to turn down a dinner invitation from you? I will be there, count on it. And with a guest, big sis, if you don’t mind,” she grinned.

Mrs. Brown grabbed her younger sister’s hands. “What? Who? Girl, you better call me! Is this the same guy you’ve been seeing all this time?”

“Yes!” Ernie cried, almost bouncing with excitement. “But don’t make a big deal out of it, Mikki. I mean, I think he’s the one, but, you know—who knows?”

“Call me!” Mrs. Brown said again, hugging her tightly. “You hear me? *Call me.*”

“I will,” Ernie promised. “But for now, I’d better get out of here. I have to go home and change. He’s taking me out to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, then we’d better get going then. You call me, sis,” she said one last time, giving Ernie another hug.

Finally, Reggie thought to herself as they left the shop. Who cared about Ernie’s boyfriend when there was so much to do to get ready to debut her makeover tomorrow?

She could hardly wait until then.

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“Reggie! CeCe and Terrence are here! Don’t keep them waiting!” Mrs. Brown’s voice floated up the staircase the next morning.

Reggie stood up, slipping her arms through her backpack. She’d been ready for what seemed like hours. Any other day, she would’ve been downstairs already, standing in the doorway waiting for them. But today she’d stayed upstairs in her room, peeking at them from her bedroom window as they’d approached her house. After all, she had this big entrance to make.

CeCe and Tee were talking quietly, their backs to Reggie as she came down the stairs. Tee

noticed her first, his mouth dropping as she got closer.

“Ooh, Reggie!” CeCe cried, reaching out to touch Reggie’s hair. “Your hair looks really pretty.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Mrs. Brown warned from across the room.

“Oh, Mama,” Reggie replied. “It’s okay if CeCe touches it.”

Mrs. Brown shook her head, chuckling softly as she headed back into the kitchen. “You guys get going. Do not miss that bus, hear?”

“So Ernie decided to do your hair like this?” CeCe asked, still staring at Reggie as they left the house.

“No, I showed her a picture from a black hair magazine that she left at my house last week. I decided I wanted it like this.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” CeCe pouted, sounding a little hurt.

“What is the big deal?” Tee scowled, rolling his eyes. “So what—she straightened out that kinky hair of hers. Big woo!”

“My hair is not kinky, Terrence!” Reggie cried angrily, hitting him on the arm.

“Well, it must be if you had to use a hotcomb to straighten it out. That’s what you call *kinky*, girl.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say,” CeCe said, glaring at him.

“You know what—who really cares? Y’all some silly girls, anyway,” he said, breaking into a run.

“Don’t pay any attention to him, Reg. You know how boys are.” CeCe shook her head, rolling her eyes.

“Weird,” Reggie agreed, watching Tee join his friends at the bus stop. The small group of boys turned as Reggie and CeCe got closer to them.

“What are you looking at?” Reggie frowned, glaring at them.

“At you trying to be all cute,” one of Tee’s friends, Dexter, said with a grin.

Reggie smiled shyly. “Oh.”

Tee rolled his eyes and walked away.

“*So* weird,” CeCe muttered to Reggie under her breath.

The bus came a few moments later and Dexter stepped aside to let Reggie go ahead of him as the small crowd of kids began boarding. CeCe nudged her and the two began giggling and whispering fiercely as they stumbled up the aisle and slid into their usual seat.

“Dee, what are you doing, man? I saved you a seat!” Tee called from the back of the bus.

Dexter made an impatient gesture at him and slid into an empty seat behind Reggie and CeCe, who promptly burst into another fit of giggles and whispers.

The front of the school was crowded as usual when the bus pulled up. Reggie wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans nervously. This was the moment she’d been waiting and practicing for all night. She hadn’t expected to feel this nervous.

“Reggie,” CeCe said, looking back at her. “Are you coming?”

Reggie nodded absently, barely noticing Dexter standing at the end of the aisle, the silly grin still on his face.

It seemed as if all eyes turned on her as she got off the bus. She wanted to believe that it was

because she looked so fabulous today, but she knew it was really because of Dexter, who was one of the most popular kids in school. Everyone always turned when he or one of the other popular kids got off the bus or out of their parent's car.

Any other day, Dexter would usually walk very slowly, with his jacket open just enough so that everyone could see how he was dressed. The girls would spend all day talking about how cute he was, and the boys would spend all day trying to hang out with him, secretly imitating the way he walked and talked, and wishing they could be as cool as he was. But today he barely noticed the stares. His attention was on Reggie.

“Reggie,” he said as they stepped off the bus. “Want to eat lunch with me and my friends today?”

Reggie bit her lip to keep from grinning. Sitting at the “cool table” with Dexter was a big deal. She had no idea that her makeover would be this powerful. Otherwise, she would've done it a long time ago!

“Sure,” she said, shrugging her shoulders as if she didn’t care. Of course, she really did.

“Maybe you can sit with us too,” Reggie said to CeCe as they headed inside.

CeCe shook her head. “He didn’t ask me. It’s okay. Just tell me all about it later,” CeCe grinned.

Reggie promised that she would just as the bell rang and the students began filing inside loudly.

The morning seemed to creep along and Reggie found herself daydreaming about eating lunch with Dexter and some of the other popular kids. It was hard to believe that it was all because of her hair.

The lunch bell rang and Reggie jumped to her feet, escaping from the room before Miss Ellis could complain that she hadn’t been paying attention—again. Who could sit in class doing math problems on a day like this?

“Reggie!” called a voice from somewhere inside the crowd of students heading for the lunchroom. “Wait for me at the door!”

“Okay!” she yelled back. She didn’t know where the voice was coming from, but she could tell it was Dexter.

Keisha Simmons and Gina James, *the* most popular girls in the fourth grade, were already at the table as Reggie and Dexter sat down. Reggie pretended not to see them look at each other, but she did wonder what they were thinking.

“You’re Reggie, right?” Gina asked after a few moments.

Reggie nodded quietly, hiding her hands under the table. The two girls would probably laugh at her if they saw how much she was sweating.

“Your hair looks nice today,” Keisha remarked, reaching for her soda.

Reggie had barely gotten out a *thank you* before the two girls turned back to each other, discussing their plans for shopping at the mall after school. Reggie ate her lunch quietly, feeling a little less nervous but still wishing CeCe was there with her. At least then she’d have someone to talk to. With Keisha and Gina pretty much ignoring her, and Dexter paying her almost no attention—except to ask her if she was going to Simone

Askew's part on Saturday—she felt very alone. The only good thing was that she was sitting close enough to them to make all the other kids in the cafeteria a little jealous and wishing they were in her place.

“We've still got ten minutes,” Dexter pointed out as they all started crumpling up their paper bags and tossing them into a nearby trash can.

“We're going outside,” Gina announced, flinging her long hair back over her shoulders. Keisha, whose hair was not quite as long but was just as pretty, did the same with hers as she slid out from behind the table.

“Are you coming?” she asked Reggie. Her tone wasn't very friendly, but it was good enough for Reggie, who nodded and walked alongside Dexter as they left the lunchroom.

It was drizzling lightly as the group stepped outside, heading for the far end of the playground, the way they did almost everyday. Keisha and Gina took their usual spots on the bench there, and Dexter and his friends leaned against the metal fence behind them, the way they always did. Reggie tried not to feel nervous as she stood

quietly between them, her hands deep in her pockets.

There was a sudden crack of thunder a moment later and they all jumped up, screaming and running as rain poured from the sky heavily, soaking them through and through by the time they reached the building.

“*Ugh*,” Keisha groaned, holding her arms out as she dripped water on the lunchroom floor. “Look at me.”

“Look at *me*,” Gina whined. Leaning forward, she grabbed her hair and squeezed water out of it. “I look terrible.”

“We can go into the girls’ locker room and dry off,” Reggie suggested.

Keisha looked at her and nodded. “You’re right. Come on, you guys.”

Reggie tried not to grin too hard as she followed them down the hallway.

The bell rang as they held their clothes up to the heat dryers in the locker room, but neither of the girls seemed worried about it, so Reggie decided not to worry either.

They were much drier by the time they'd slipped back into their clothes and towel-dried their hair. Gina ran a brush through hers and Keisha pulled hers up into a ponytail. Reggie turned to the mirror to fix hers and gasped.

"*Ew*," Keisha said, wrinkling up her nose. "What happened to your hair?"

Reggie fought back tears as she saw the two girls' faces in the mirror. They looked fine, almost like they'd never been caught in the rain at all. Her hair, though, had drawn up into a tight afro at the roots, and she could barely get her fingers through it.

"Um, we'd better go," Gina said, pushing Keisha towards the door. She could hear them giggling and whispering as they reached the hallway.

The door opened slowly and Dexter stuck his head in.

"What are you doing? Boys aren't allowed in here!" Reggie cried, hoping he wouldn't notice her hair.

But he did, and he stood there for what seemed like forever to Reggie. She could tell

exactly what he was thinking by the look on his face and she knew she wouldn't even have to bother asking if she could go to that party on Saturday after all.

"I gotta go," he said quietly, turning to leave.

Reggie burst into tears as the door closed behind him. Another bell rang and she realized suddenly that she'd missed an entire class. She was going to be in big trouble, that was for sure.

Dexter was still in the hallway as Reggie came out of the locker room. Rolling her eyes, she rushed past him and his friends, who burst into laughter as she passed them. She could hear Tee's voice somewhere behind her, calling her name, but she ignored him too as she raced out of the building.

Her aunt Ronnie was more than a little surprised to see her waiting at the bus stop when she pulled up. Reggie stumbled onto the bus, her face soaked both with tears and raindrops. Ronnie asked her over and over again why she was so upset, but Reggie couldn't stop crying long enough to explain.

“I have to see Aunt Ernie,” was all she could manage between tears. “I have to see Aunt Ernie.”

Ronnie drove on quietly, glancing at her with worry in the mirror at each stop on the bus route.

They finally reached the shop and Ronnie pulled the bus over and jumped up as she opened the door.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the other passengers on the bus. “This will only take ten seconds,” she said as she and Reggie got off the bus.

“Reggie, what are you doing here? What’s wrong, boo?” Ernie frowned as Reggie came through the door in tears.

“She jumped on my bus and told me she needed to see you right away. I’ll call Mikki and tell her where Reggie is. She’ll be worried sick,” Ronnie said, waving as she turned to run back to her bus.

“Darlene, honey, will you finish up Miss Preston for me while I talk to my niece?” Ernie called to her assistant as she led the sobbing girl back into her office.

“Now, Reggie, tell me what’s wrong, honey. You’re worrying me.” Ernie closed the office door behind her and leaned against it.

“My—my hair,” Reggie sobbed, pulling off the hat she’d found stuffed in the bottom of her backpack.

Ernie ran her fingers through Reggie’s hair, which had dried by now and was even kinkier than before.

“Oh, honey, it’s nothing we can’t fix. If you want, I can do it right now.”

“But if it gets wet again, it’ll be just like this again.”

“That’s because your hair is natural, Reggie.”

“But I want it straight,” Reggie whined, wiping her eyes. “Like the pretty girls at school. And in all the videos and magazines.”

“*Oh*,” Ernie said, sitting down on the couch. “Now I see.”

Pulling Reggie close to her, she took the girl’s face in her hands, staring deeply into her eyes.

“Is that why you changed your hairstyle, Reggie? Because you think having straight hair makes you prettier?”

Reggie nodded, sniffing. Ernie sighed, taking her hands.

“Would you like to know a little secret? I don’t think you’re pretty. I think you’re beautiful, and not just on the outside. See, baby, it’s not just about how long or how short your hair is. It’s not about how straight or how curly. It’s not about having light or dark skin. It’s not about any of those things, do you hear me, Reggie Brown? It’s about how good and how nice you are to people. And it’s about loving yourself. That’s what makes a beautiful person. Do you understand, baby?”

Reggie nodded again as Ernie wiped at her tears.

“You know what’s so beautiful about our culture? We have so many looks and each one is so beautiful. It’s too bad that the people who make those videos, magazines and TV shows sometimes forget that.”

“And the boys too.”

“What boys?”

“The boys at my school. They always talk to girls like Keisha and Gina.”

“Well, let them,” Ernie said firmly. “They don’t know what they’re missing out on. And besides, Reggie Brown—you are *way* too young to be concerned about boys. You better not let your mama hear you talking like that,” she laughed.

Reggie smiled. “Okay.”

“And speaking of boys,” Ernie said, looking past Reggie.

Reggie turned to find Tee peeking into the room.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Tee,” Ernie said. “Come on in. What did you do, run all the way here?”

Tee nodded. “I know all the shortcuts.”

“How did you know I was here?” Reggie frowned, putting her hands on her hips.

“I know you, Reg. I figured you’d come to see Ernie.”

“Oh. Well, what do you want?” she asked, still frowning.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. You know.” He bowed his head, digging his hands deep into his pockets.

“I’m fine,” Reggie said a little less harshly.

“Okay.” Tee turned to leave. “And forget Dexter, Reggie. He’s not as cool as he thinks he is.”

Reggie nodded quietly as he left. Ernie grinned, but said nothing.

The door opened again, and this time Mrs. Brown rushed in, her face creased with worry.

Reggie gasped. “Mama, what are you doing here?”

Mrs. Brown stopped short, putting her purse down on Ernie’s desk.

“I should be asking you that, little girl. What’s wrong?” she asked gently. “Ronnie called and told me you were here. Is everything okay now?” she asked, glancing at Ernie.

“I think so,” Ernie nodded, wiping away the last of Reggie’s tears. “Reggie?”

Reggie nodded. “I’m okay now, Mama.”

Mrs. Brown sighed, pulling Reggie into a hug. “You had me so worried, Reg. Please don’t do this again, okay? Promise?”

“I promise, Mama.”

“Tell you what—why don’t you and I go out for a cup of hot chocolate and talk. Like girlfriends. Would you like that?”

Reggie smiled. Hot chocolate almost always made things better.

“Okay then,” Mrs. Brown smiled, taking her hand.

“Well, you ladies have fun,” Ernie groaned as she got to her feet. “I, on the other hand, have to get back to work.”

“Thanks as always, sis,” Mrs. Brown said, leaning forward to kiss Ernie on the cheek.

“Anytime, Mikki. You got that, Reggie?” she said, turning to Reggie and poking her nose playfully.

“Got it,” Reggie grinned, hugging her favorite aunt tightly.

“Ready?” asked Mrs. Brown.

“Wait!” Reggie cried, running over to the mirror that hung on the wall across the room. Pulling the hat in her hand down over her messy hair, she smiled, spinning around to face the two women.

“*Now* I’m ready,” she said, and the three of them burst into a fit of laughter.