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Twisted: My Dreadlock Chronicles

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Twisted

My Dreadlock Chronicles

Bert Ashe

BOLDEN

AN AGATE IMPRINT

CHICAGO

Confession (i)

I killed dreadlocks. It was a crime of passion.

Anyone with eyes can see how dread has spread. If a map of the United States is the country's headshot in profile, then California is a snub nose, lower Texas is a double chin, and the Great Lakes are three stubby blue dreads sprouting out of an American scalp—with a thick Florida dreadlock dangling beneath the nation's neckline. If the hairstyle has become less radical, if it's devolved in the last decade or so, dropping from exclusive, Uppercase Dreads to common-denominator, lowercase locks, point fingers directly at me. I walk around campus, cheer at ball games, joke with my kids; I sit at movies, dine at restaurants, worship at church; I live and breathe under black, lipstick-thick tubes of hair that curl out of my head and slide down around my neck and shoulders.

God knows I'd always wanted dreadlocks. Wanted them for the longest time. And, finally, I did it: I got twisted. And it was everything I'd wanted it to be, as well as nothing I'd ever expected. I loved and dreaded dreads. They both satisfied my curiosity and caused me, at times, to be sure I was losing my mind.

The killing was unintentional. But I'm confessing, nevertheless, freely admitting to it, intentional or not. You could call it involuntary manslaughter, if you prefer. I call it murder. "But

that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead," to quote Mr. Ralph Ellison, an idiomatic spirit who hovers above my head and breathes down my neck, a man whose derisive laughter I can hear at any waking moment of the day or night...

Hair varies, after all. Superman and *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson have two of the more famous locks of hair-dangling-over-foreheads. But their locks each look slightly different. People use the term "a lock of hair" as if they're sure they know what that means, but there's no true consensus. All those individual mental images of a lock, in all those various minds, are all slightly different—and sometimes significantly different. "Lock" is a deceptively simple term, since the look of an exact lock of hair cannot be strictly determined. A dreadlock? Even less so.

What you're about to read is a dread simulation; it takes the form of a single, heavy dreadlock. The narrative strands weave as tightly as the hair fibers that lock locks together: History ducks and overlaps with culture; the process of locking hair wraps up and around questions of identity; public perception winds down and around racial issues that turn up and curve and twirl—and it all weaves in and out and around examinations of the nature of style itself. What follows is not linear, cannot be linear—because dreadlocks are not a linear hairstyle.

Think back to the first time you saw dreadlocks, back when they were still alive. It was such a stylistic disruption from the familiar black hairstyles of the day, even the "natural" black hairstyles of the day. Consciously or unconsciously, apprehending a head of dread forces the viewer to recalibrate what a hairstyle is supposed to be, is supposed to mean. Do the same when you read on.

You'll see: I was sure I'd killed dreadlocks, once and for all time. I just knew that in thirty years the style would be endlessly mocked and ridiculed, parodically worn for ironic effect, the same way the Afro is worn today. (I don't know who killed the Afro, and I don't care—that's someone else's burden.) It's painful. I loved dreadlocks long before I wore

them, loved whatever I imagined they stood for, loved everything I thought they were supposed to mean.

I thought it was all over. I had no idea.