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Baking Appliances

A newspaper review of "The Voice of the Turtle" at the Barksdale Theater started me on a nostalgia trip back to the appliances of years ago. It applauded the play's successful evocation of the fifties' atmosphere and noted specifically the "turn-the-slice-yourself toasters that managed to burn more bread than they browned." I remember using that sort of toaster in the 1930's; it may have been the first electric toaster and apparently was modeled on one that was placed on top of a wood stove burner. But it seemed to have been a part of kitchen life in the fifties, too. Another appliance which came to mind was the ancestor of today's refrigerator - the ice box, with its large block of ice delivered twice weekly and the drip pan which had to be emptied. But my strongest memory was of the appliances for curling hair, perhaps because I was having a "bad hair" day.

When I was a very little girl, I enjoyed the occasional treat of having my hair curled by that day's curling iron, which had to be wielded carefully to avoid branding ears or neck. The improvement in my appearance was so transient that it hardly withstood a gentle breeze, but it was worth the agony for even a brief mirror glimpse of what I might have been if I had eaten my carrots and spinach, an idea suggested by my dad who sometimes had little patience with my picky eating habits. I was afraid his tongue-in-cheek advice might be true. The earliest curling iron I remember was heated with a removable core that was placed in the flame of a gas burner at the kitchen stove. Achieving the proper heat to curl without singeing the hair was a problem until the electric curling iron came in a little later, much like the ones that some dexterous people use today.



A more lasting curl became available in the late twenties with the invention of the "permanent" wave. I had my first permanent wave at home when I was eleven or twelve, not by a home-permanent kit (those kits were to come years later), but by Mrs. Eldritch who carried in her car a traveling beauty salon in the form of equipment which she brought into the home. My mother, sister Martha, and I scheduled a day-long orgy of hair curling at a total cost for the day for all three of us of about ten dollars and lunch. Mrs. Eldritch would carry in a diabolical looking contrivance consisting of a five-foot stand topped by a maze of twenty wires, each ending in a cylinder some eight inches long and about two inches in diameter. The wires were separated into a radiating pattern by an

eighteen-inch ring of metal. The clanking of those cylinders against each other as she carried the contraption was a cheery, technological promise of wavy transformations. Her equipment also included a supply of slender solid rods each about eight inches long, as well as bottles of evil smelling chemicals, a handheld hair drier, and a hooded drier much like those used today.

My hair was shampooed and dried in preparation for her treatment, and I eagerly held in my mind images of soft, shiny, gorgeously curled hair like movie star Mary Astor's.



Mrs. Eldritch began by sectioning my hair into twenty uniform bunches, saturating each section with one of her chemicals, and wrapping the section evenly and tightly around one of the rods, beginning the spiral at my scalp and securing it with some kind of band at the top. Then she inserted each wrapped spiral into one of the cylinders, which entirely enclosed the rod. The set of twenty securely fastened me to the stand and was so heavy that I felt weighted down and shorter. Under each heating cylinder, she clipped a felt insulating device to try to protect my scalp from the coming heat, further stretching the skin of my face and scalp until I looked as though I had undergone a facelift. She then plugged the machine into an electric outlet, gave me a bone knitting needle to hold, and stationed herself nearby with a handheld hair drier, the ancestor of today's blow driers. After a few moments I began to smell the heating chemicals on my hair and to "feel the heat" - literally. Because I so earnestly desired curly hair, I was remarkably stoic about the increasing heat, but I was glad to have the knitting needle for pointing to each uncomfortably warm spot, to which Mrs. Eldritch applied a blast of cool air. If the heat became unbearable, she would disengage that particular spiral for a moment. The whole heating process seemed interminable but probably lasted no more than fifteen minutes. She then unplugged the machine and removed the cylinders and then the rods, giving welcome relief from the heat and weight of the machine and revealing a head full of stiff corkscrews sticking out in all directions. We went to the kitchen sink, where she sprayed my head with cold water and applied a chemical to the hair to neutralize the curling chemical and an ointment to any conspicuously burned spots on my scalp.

Then came the moment that all the suffering was for. She set my hair into waves and pin curls, put me under the drier, and went on to the next victim - uh, customer - either Mother or Martha. My several hours of patiently endured torture resulted in a wondrously stiff, curly head of hair that I cherished, carefully placing my head on the pillow at night

and earnestly trying not to move during sleep so that the hair would remain "beautiful" the next day. My own shampooing and setting of my hair was not so expert as Mrs. Eldritch's, but I gradually learned how to conquer the frizzies as they relaxed with time. Six or eight months later we would repeat the process, all in quest of the curly hair I wasn't born with.

The process of getting a permanent wave has changed drastically since those days, but somehow the hour and a half it now takes is more boring if not so physically torturous as the three or four hours it took back then. However, my twelve-year-old granddaughter, who has lovely naturally curling hair, has just proudly had a spirally wrapped perm in order to achieve the cultivated, carelessly stiff style she and her peers desire. But the effect comes without the use of that formidable electric baking appliance of my day.