PERSONAL ESSAY · CATAPULT

I Needed Control of My Life, So I Started With My Hair

I grieved the chance to have an uncomplicated pregnancy. I grieved the fact that having more babies could be potentially fatal. And I grieved a younger, more carefree me.

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I'm good at losing myself in identities. I was a misfit in high school with a goth aesthetic: black clothes, black eyeliner, black notebooks for classes. When I dropped out of college in my early twenties, I fell in love with the local punk scene and changed again: leopard-print pants, a bondage belt, white-blonde hair. In my twenties, I got a job at a bank and sported preppy sweaters and business attire. In my late twenties, a raging opioid addiction took over. At thirty, I became a mom.

At one of my treatment centers, my counselor gave me a written assignment that asked "Who am I?" I never wrote it because, although it was easy to cling to an aesthetic or label, I didn't have a genuine answer. Instead, I met a man and moved to a Midwestern suburban town to start a family. I had my first baby, and I loved motherhood so much that I had another when my oldest was only thirteen months. Motherhood became my sole identity, and with it came a new look: mom shorts, Birkenstocks, and baby carriers. I became an expert in breastfeeding and pumped in the safe-deposit room at work. I joined playgroups and networked with other moms via social media. I fantasized about becoming a lactation consultant.

In an act of millennial defiance, my husband and I purchased our first home with a deep sense of optimism for future stability. At my husband's insistence, we moved in the day after closing, packing our belongings into a U-Haul and thrifting furniture along the way. A few weeks later, I was squinting at a pregnancy test, the second line faint but certainly present. I put it on a small plate and served it to my husband with his morning coffee. I was nervous, but sure: I wanted another baby.

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My third child came with a flurry of complications. A high-risk pregnancy followed by preterm labor. I found myself in a new role: the caretaker. We found ourselves in a whirlwind of appointments: specialists, speech therapy, physical therapy. My son's care schedule was overwhelming, and I felt like Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill only to have it fall back down.

Postpartum depression and anxiety took over, with a splash of PTSD. I didn't have time to care for either of those, though. My son had a nasogastric feeding tube and terrible reflux. He could try bottles, though he rarely finished them, but we still had to try, so feeding took forever.

One morning, we were in the middle of a tube feed, and reflux was getting in the way of finishing my son's feeding on time. We needed to leave by 10:15 a.m. to get to his 11:00 a.m. eye doctor's appointment, and it was 9:30 with at least forty-five minutes remaining for his feeding. There was no way that I'd be able to finish, dress my toddlers, and arrive on time. When I called the office to tell them we'd be late, the receptionist brusquely said that if we were more than fifteen minutes late, we wouldn't be seen. I frantically explained my situation and she calmly asked if I'd like to reschedule. "Forget it," I told her. I'd try to make it.

We arrived seventeen minutes late. No one even commented on our lateness, and I went to the waiting room, staring suspiciously at all of the children whom I suspected were carrying germs that could be dangerous to my son. By the time the appointment was over, it was time to feed him again.

Every morning was a regimented schedule of balancing my son's vigorous routine while remembering there were other people in this household who needed me too. Aside from wiping their butts and keeping food on the table, I was basically unavailable to my daughters. There was little time to snuggle or read books or play. My two-year-old followed me around the house. "Mommy," she said, "hold me, I need you." I didn't have time.

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There were days my husband came home from work and found me crying on the floor. Most of the time, I was numb, moving from task to task. I took my SSRIs—the antidepressants my obstetrician prescribed me after my mother-in-law told him I was crying nonstop following my son's birth—and kept moving through my to-do list.

After noticing how burned out I was, a friend raised money for me to hire a postpartum doula. The first morning, the doula arrived before anyone in the house woke up. After she heard the baby awaken, she tapped on our bedroom door and we finally met. She was young, sweet-faced, with short purple hair. She joined me to change the baby, and soon my oldest was standing in the doorway, looking with wonder at the new person in our house.

There was a fresh pot of coffee and my breast pump was ready to go. She even cooked everyone breakfast while I pumped, bringing me a plate of eggs while I was hooked up. She was quiet, spoke only to ask if I needed anything or what she could do to help. We sat together, folding clothes and making small talk as we matched socks. I'm not sure I can recall another time that I felt so taken care of, even as a married woman.

Mothers do so much with very little reciprocity. Having someone there to care for me, and only me, gave me a boost of energy that I could channel into loving my family. I thought I could finally let go a bit, regain some control of my life.

But doulas are expensive, and it came to an end after about three weeks and eight visits. It gave me time to recharge, but soon enough, my life was everyone else's and all of the work was mine again.

Wake up. Change diapers. Serve breakfast. Feed baby. TV. Snack. TV. Lunch. Feed baby. Snack. Prep dinner. Cook dinner. Feed baby. Family dinner. TV. Story. Bath. Toddler bedtime. Feed baby. Baby bedtime. Cry. Fall asleep on the couch during "quality time." Go to bed. Repeat.

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I started tallying the things I *did* have control over. I could control whether I took a shower every day, and I always tried to get one before 9:00 a.m. I could control what we ate for dinner, so I bought a special planner with meal-planning entry pages.

The list of things I couldn't control was longer: I couldn't control my son's feeding. I couldn't control the chaos in my home. I couldn't control my toddlers. No one saw that I was drowning. My husband was drowning and overwhelmed too. No one rushed to help, in spite of my tearful calls to my mother begging her to drop everything and get on a plane.

But I could change my hair. I could—as I often did—lean into a brand, control my appearance. I would dye my dark brown hair blonde.

One night, I pulled up my old Flickr account and browsed pictures from my early twenties, with my leopard pants, bondage belt, and blonde hair. What a bad bitch I was, I thought. I was cute and sassy. My hair was so light, it looked like I was ready to burn down King's Landing. I remembered long nights staggering home up a big hill on Main Street in Pittsburgh, stopping at the playground to swing when I was halfway up. Waking up with bruises after falling down a fire escape the night before and picking up skinny dudes with Mohawks at Eighties Night. I'd never be able to recreate these days, but I could certainly recreate the aesthetic.

The next day, I stopped at Walgreens to pick up some hair dye. The model on the box I chose had white platinum hair—a Debbie Harry blonde. My hair was very long, and very dark. One box wouldn't cut it. I grabbed two.

My heart started racing, but I hurried to the register. The cashier gave no commentary about the dramatic change I was about to undergo. Though there are times when this silence is better: When I was pregnant with my son and bleeding, a cashier commented on my basket of pads and chocolate. I held back from telling her that I wasn't menstruating and that my child might be dying in my body. Sometimes less is more.

At home, as the kids slept, I mixed the bleach and saturated my hair. My head tingled as the bleach processed, and I washed it out after forty-five minutes. I inspected my reflection. My hair certainly wasn't blonde. The roots were a golden orange and the ends a dark red, almost brown.

I was disappointed but unsurprised. I needed more dye, and this mishap only fueled my desire to get it right. Playing with my hair gave me the chance to reach back to the person I was before I was a mother, the identity I'd so firmly latched on to—before my life was all breast pumps and diapers, before the substance abuse.

I never saw my latest pregnancy playing out like this. My first ones were complicated, too, but relatively safe—both ended with preeclampsia and mostly uneventful inductions at thirty-seven weeks. With my son, the pregnancy became dangerous at nineteen weeks and ended abruptly with his premature birth at twenty-eight weeks; the general consensus from our medical team was that we were lucky to have made it as far as we did.

I grieved the chance to have an uncomplicated pregnancy. I grieved the fact that having more babies could be potentially fatal. And I grieved a younger, more carefree me. I missed being playful and fun. But even if I was tired and boring, I could inject a little bit of fun into my life with some bleach, a mixing bowl, and a coloring brush.

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The next day, I took all three kids to Sally Beauty. We walked through the store, me intercepting every lipstick and box of hair dye my two-year-old tried to pick up. Then, the store manager recommended I try a lightening cream with no bleach.

I went home and slathered it all over my hair, but it did nothing, my hair not a single shade lighter. I convinced my husband to let me go back to Sally Beauty—alone—to get exactly what I had asked for to begin with: bleach, 40 volume developer, and a toner.

It was frustrating, but I finally had my own project. Since having children, my love language shifted from Quality Time to Alone Time. Bleaching my hair gave me a reason to shut myself in the bathroom and tend to my appearance, something I had been neglecting since I birthed my first baby. The bonus: I didn't have to talk to anyone. This was time to be spent on me, and only me.

When the kids went to bed, I went to work on my hair. I put the bleach in and let it sit, smoking outside and texting my cosmetologist friend pictures as it processed. Occasionally, my husband asked exasperatedly if I was almost done. I explained to him that this was an undertaking I needed to commit to on my own; he couldn't come on this journey.

I used to love spending quality time with romantic partners, but spending entire days with small children changed that. It's overstimulating. One moment, I'm gazing at my tiny people wondering how I made something so beautiful, and the next moment I'm sitting on the kitchen floor behind the baby gate so no one asks for a bite of my oatmeal.

I finally rinsed, blow-dried, and stared at myself in the mirror, a bit disappointed. My hair was lighter but still very, very yellow. I needed to bleach it again, but my hair needed rest.

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The next week, something had changed. My son had been eating entirely by mouth for the first time since he came home from the hospital. After months of frustrating nasogastric tube feedings, this was the news we wanted. We put the G-tube surgery appointment we had scheduled on hold. Something good was brewing.

It was time to do my hair again. I sat with a head of bleach for a half hour, rinsed. The top of my hair was platinum blonde, ends still yellow. I erred on the side of caution and didn't use more bleach. I bought some yellow Arctic Fox hair dye from Sally Beauty instead, bright yellow like a pop art girl. My friends on social media celebrated the change. My husband didn't care for it, nor did his parents. But it wasn't for them. I wore it for another six weeks.

Looking different made me feel different, and feeling different made me more confident. After living in a pregnant body for three years, I no longer felt pretty. I never got that cute baby bump, just swollen body parts. I was finally starting to look Not Pregnant, and the fresh hair enhanced it.

I felt a bit better, but the superficial can't change everything. Self-care goes beyond messing with your hair. When I told my mom, she asked me, "What now? Did you gain anything from this experience, or are you just going to keep on controlling your hair?" I laughed at first and quoted her on social media. But it made me think, what else was missing?

When people told me how strong I was, I wondered why they couldn't see I was struggling. When people offered help, I wanted to seem like I had it under control. The days of having a doula were long over, just a Band-Aid on a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding. But when a friend offered to help, I was so happy to see another adult, I couldn't think of a single task to delegate. Finally, two months after my initial mishap with the drugstore box of bleach, I did the unthinkable for all womankind: I sought long-term help.

I enrolled myself in an outpatient group therapy program for perinatal mood disorders. I got sober and returned to recovery support groups. (After a few years of almost total abstinence, short of some wine between pregnancies, a few slips with my drug of choice made it clear that I needed additional support.) I started asking myself who I was and who I wanted to be outside of being a mother. I needed to change more than my appearance; I needed to change everything.

I still messed with my hair, though. The day before Halloween, my hair was finally platinum blonde. I dressed up as Courtney Love, wearing a lacy dress from a thrift store with combat boots and a yellow suit coat. I bought red matte lipstick that I still have in my makeup kit but rarely wear out of the house. I took my kids trick-or-treating in my too-short, too-low-cut dress—the hot punk mommy I used to see at the punx picnics.

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As I grew happier and healthier, and felt more self-assured, my son's health improved. My husband and I were finally able to get a babysitter. I had more time to hold my toddlers when they needed me. I stopped buying suburban mom clothes. I found indie designers on Etsy and bought their inventory. A friend from college makes big plastic resin earrings in an '80s punk style: giant red lips, handcuffs, and lightning bolts. I bought five pairs. For Christmas, my mom gifted me money to get my hair done professionally.

Life didn't get perfect immediately. Last year, I returned to inpatient substance-abuse treatment after a few additional slips. As I looked at my grown-out roots in the mirror of the detox bathroom, I realized I wanted to do more.

When I got out of treatment, I moved into a sober house for a few months and decided to hone my old passions. I started writing professionally. My friends always told me I had a way with words, but it took me a while to believe them. I started sending my work to editors and getting published. And I'm preparing to apply for graduate school, a goal I abandoned over a decade ago.

In my living room the other morning, I was all dressed up with my giant lightning-bolt earrings, and my friend told me I looked like a punk rock Barbie. I laughed and told her I meticulously cultivated this aesthetic. That's not untrue, but there's so much more underneath it now. I'm growing every day into the person that I always wanted to be to begin with. I'm busy in new ways now, every day getting closer to my epiphany: I was always here.