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## **Sticks and stones ... and combs**

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*Reader comments: "I was very touched when you had problems with your hair." Rita Tobey, Fraser*

"What do you have on your head?" a reader wrote. "It's too ugly to be a wig. It's too ugly for any woman with pride. Did you use an egg beater on it? Shame on you."

The penmanship was perfect. A woman's, I believe.

Then, a week or so later, a voice-mail call from a woman to my editor: "Tell Susan Ager to fix her hair, puh-leeze! And the corny columns she writes have got to get better or she's gotta go. But the hair's gotta go for sure."

Then, in one morning's mail, I opened a bumpy envelope to find a small black plastic comb.

My friends laughed over these endearments from readers. I did, too, at first. But the more I thought about them, the more I steamed.

Good thing I decided to smile with my mouth closed, I thought, or the Pretty Police would be telling me to get my teeth fixed.

Good thing my photo doesn't show that I wear no makeup, or they'd be writing, "You're so washed-out it's pathetic. What's wrong with you? Don't you know a woman your age needs color?"

### **Their way or no way**

Who are these know-it-alls?

They're the same women who roll their eyes over a stranger whose dress is out of fashion, who cluck over their absent friend whose roots have been showing, who wonder why Millie with the turkey wrinkles around her neck doesn't just go and get them fixed. Has she no pride?

The women who think there's one right way to look: Their Way.

I've never liked my hair much, either. One hair cutter called it "cat fur." It's so fine that when I wash it I can gather it in one fist with plenty of room to spare. It knows only two tricks: Lie flat, or frizz.

But I've never much liked my teeth, either. Or my cheeks. Or my upper arms. Or my hands. Or my thighs. Or my feet. When I was 13 and keeping a journal, I made a list one day of all my physical flaws. It consumed a page and a half.

I desperately wished I were prettier. When I was 16 and reading "Seventeen" magazine, I came across a shampoo ad that reminded me how high the stakes were: a page of photos of about 16 teenage girls, with radiant faces and luscious hair. In the middle, circled by these lovelies, was the dour face of a plain girl, her hair flat and dull.

The headline read: "They're all your competition."

### **Keeping up**

I've spent a quarter-century wrestling with the absurd notion in that ad and thousands of others: that I could compete with my hair, or should want to. That I need to "keep myself up," with the right clothes and makeup and hair goop. That I'll be judged by my looks. And that other women are my enemies.

All women struggle with this, but time tends to relieve us of our pettier insecurities. No more do I get chills as I approach a beach in a bathing suit.

No more do I spend any time curling or burning or teasing or coaxing or shellacking my recalcitrant hair. I spend less time than ever keeping myself up, and maybe as a result feel more confident than ever about who I am.

So when other women, of all people, take on my hair, tell me no woman with pride would allow it, tell me it's even more offensive than my words -- well!

I don't get hurt. I get angry. A streak of violence surges through my peace-loving heart, and I wanna grab them by the collar and say with all deliberate precision: "I do not need or want this crap from you. How dare you try to shove me back to the insecurities of my youth?"

But I calm down. I smirk a little. It's only hair.

And I can be thankful I don't know them, don't live with them and don't have to be their daughter.