

# Bad hair days

*Straighteners now outsell hair dryers, which comes as no surprise to one writer who spends the equivalent of five days and nights a year taming her unruly locks*

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Roy Lichtenstein, *Nude With Blue Hair, State 1*.

Others battle with drink or drugs, but my demon is frizzy hair. It looks good when it's straightened, but turns into candyfloss in even mild humidity. I can only imagine what it would be like to camp at Glastonbury, I shall never visit Hong Kong and I always take a hat with me if it looks like rain.

It takes 20 minutes to iron my hair flat. That's 140 minutes a week, 560 minutes a month ... the equivalent of five days and nights each year wasted on fighting my hair. So when, this week, the UK's Office for National Statistics revealed that hair straighteners now outsell hairdryers I was relieved. It was some comfort to discover quite how widespread the quest for straight hair has become.

Some people may think this is frivolous. It's not. A few years ago, Hillary Clinton stepped onto a podium before Yale's graduation class to make a speech. "The most important thing I have to say," she told her eager audience, "is that hair matters. Pay attention to your hair. Because everyone else will." Cherie Blair, wife of the former UK prime minister, reached the same conclusion. Having been mocked for opening her front door, in 1997, with hair "like a bird's nest" (her words), she took her hair in hand — only to be criticized during the last election campaign for claiming £7,700 (US\$11,600) for her hairdressing bills.

The hairdresser John Frieda estimates that 60 percent of the UK's population has frizzy hair, and most of them hate it. "Frizzy hair is dry, coarse and rough-textured. Who wants that? People with frizzy hair want to make it look smoother, so they can run their hair through their fingers."

When Frieda introduced Frizz-Ease in 1990, it created a global sensation. In 2001, Frieda sold up to the Japanese Kao Corporation for US\$450 million.

Hair straighteners are an even newer phenomenon. In 1998, another hairdresser, Luke Hershenson, noticed a stylist using straighteners during a fashion shoot. "You couldn't get straight hair like that then," Hershenson says. "I said, 'Where did you get these from? They're amazing.' I phoned up this place in Milan immediately and got them to send me some." He started using the irons during styling sessions at his father's salon, Daniel Hershenson, then a year later, the salon launched its own Smooth Groove ceramic irons, which immediately became a cult product.

Suddenly, Jennifer Aniston's long, straight hair was within the grasp of everyone, even a hairdryer klutz like me.

More than a decade on, Hershenson says hair straighteners have now reached critical mass. "They have become a central item in a girl's beauty regime," he says. The reason for this is simple: "They are idiot proof, much easier to use than a hairdryer." (He's quite right: even some hairdressers admit to having trouble styling their own hair.)

But why is straight, shiny hair so covetable? Philip Kingsley, the trichologist who invented the term "bad hair day," says: "There is a vital link between sexuality and hair; men prefer straighter, shinier, longer hair."

Rose Weitz, a sociologist and author of an authoritative book about women and their hair, *Rapunzel's Daughters*, agrees that hair gives out important signals. "It is personal, growing directly out of our bodies. It is public, on view for all to see. And it is malleable, allowing us to change it more or less at whim. It's not surprising that we use our hair to project our identity," she says. There is a political side to this, too. Last year, fierce debate raged in America's black community — sparked by Chris Rock's film *Good Hair* — over African American women, such as Michelle Obama, wearing their hair straight and shiny. The film was prompted by Rock's young daughter coming to him in tears asking, "Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?"

But the glory days for straight hair could be over. "Hair fashion changes every decade," Frieda says. "The 50s backcomb and hairspray, the Vidal Sassoon geometric [in the 60s], the long flicky hair of the 70s, big power hair in the 80s ... if you look at the catwalk now, it's all curly, wavy hair."

Newby Hands, beauty director of *Harper's Bazaar*, agrees. "Poker-straight hair has not been a catwalk look for a long time," she says. "But it's an easy look to achieve, which is why it's appealing. Using straightening irons is a bit like how our mother's generation used heated rollers — it's not for fashion, it's so women can control their hair."

The irony is that today's loose, wavy catwalk looks — think Kate Moss with her bed-head — are actually harder to achieve than the Jennifer Aniston.

What to do? Well, Luke Hershenson claims he has perfected an idiot-proof curling iron for people like me. And Hands believes I should try one of the "permanent" blow-dry treatments, creating smooth, but not poker-straight hair, available in the top salons. At more than US\$300 a pop, they are hardly mass-market, but when the price comes down — as Hands believes it will — the treatment could be revolutionary.

I'm not sure. Anybody as neurotic about hair as I am is chronically nervous about trying something new. So, for the moment, I shall stick to my favorite straightening device.

Nine years ago, hearing that it was to be discontinued, I bought 10. Earlier this year, and down to my last one — they blow up after about a year — I searched the Internet for replacements. Eventually, I tracked down a shop in Germany that still had some. I got my husband, who speaks rudimentary German, to order six.

I now should have enough to last until 2016.

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