

500

WORDS OR LESS

Hair and Hue

By Eve Glicksman

ME, A BLONDE? My suspicion was that it was no compliment when two people I met for the first time at a professional conference expressed surprise at my coffee-bean colored curls. During the course of our telephone relationship, each had conjured up an image of me with golden tresses.

Did I sound dumb? Kittenish? Incompetent? Trust me, if I had a voice like Melanie Griffith, I would have had vocal cord surgery.

When it comes to hair color, it seems that women are little more than a medium for the message. Blonde is sexy, desirable and synonymous with busty in the male imagination.

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Brown hair is sometimes spicy, but more often sensible or mousy. Redheads are hot-tempered and tempestuous in bed. Then, there is the old gray mare who ain't what she used to be. Yes, it's a good thing that women have different hair colors or men would never understand us.

Yet take Kato Kaelin, a true blond in thought, word and deed. Why wasn't he ever reduced to being called "the blond" during the O.J. trial? Blonde jokes are always about women, too. Did you hear about the blonde who won the gold medal at the Olympics? She had it bronzed.

In the movies, blonde has stood for sensual over intellectual, glamour over domesticity, innocence over evil. Could Marilyn Monroe be anything but blonde, or Betty Davis anything but brunette? One brunette I know says she is having a "blonde day" whenever she's done something stupid.

Some explain the appeal of blondes as a mere visual effect. Blonde reflects light and catches the eye. The brightness stands out in a crowd and you get the "me see, me like" phenomenon. On the other hand, my friend George says he has always felt invisible as a blond. He figures that if there was more contrast between his hair and his face, people would notice him more. (Sure, George.)

Clairol has been brilliantly tapping into the blonde mystique for years with slogans like "Blondes have more fun" and "If I only have one life . . . let me live it as a blonde." Yet the American predilection for blonde is complicated by it being a culturally exclusive hair color. Holding up a blonde beauty ideal is seen by some as racism against African Americans, Hispanics and other primarily dark-haired ethnic groups.

And explain this: Statistics correlating hair color and income data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that in 1993 men and women with naturally blond hair actually made an average of 75 cents more per hour than others.

All said, I'm left with one bothersome thought after my brush with mistaken blonde identity. What if I just get the drawbacks of sounding blonde on the phone . . . and reap none of the advantages of looking like one?



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