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**The rise and
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Afua Hirsch**

**Ways to wear this
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‘It doesn’t get easier’

Robert De Niro on becoming a father again at 80, the horror of Trump – and why every day counts

The average British woman spends £70,000 on their appearance in a lifetime. Here, writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch explains why turning 40 was the beginning of her 'year of adornment' – and a rejection of society's rigid beauty standards. All except for one thing...

*Photographs SUKI DHANDA
Stylist MELANIE WILKINSON*



My beautiful year



Making her mark:
Afua wears dress by
farmrio.eu, mules by
manoloblahnik.com;
earrings by galleria-armadoro.com; ring
by nadaghazal.com

My mother has always said Zizi has healing hands. It's one of an endless number of paradoxes about my diminutive friend and beauty therapist. She is under 5ft tall, with sturdy olive skin, tousled hair, and a fondness for pedal-pusher playsuits, so it's hard to guess her age. In truth, she's almost 50, but still frequents raves. She cares for her brother, and her mum, who has been in the UK for a lifetime but still only speaks Portuguese. Zizi is fit from lugging her treatment bed around, from the miracles she works on whoever is lucky enough to be on it, from HIIT circuits she does in the park. And she's addicted to smoking cigarettes.

Zizi has been waxing, pedicuring and massaging the female members of my family for almost two decades. She knows all our backs, labia, feet and underarms intricately. If the things I share are anything to go by, she's also the custodian of a tapestry of secrets: things we've each told her, but never each other. Zizi's secret, how her touch cures muscle tension, her varnish clings to nails for days longer than it rightfully should, and why the hairs on which she has wrought wondrous violence struggle so long to grow back, none of us know. She has some kind of beauty therapist superpower.

At one recent appointment, Zizi surprises me with a distinctly pro-scientific suggestion. Why not try laser hair removal, she suggests. Instead of paying her every few months to wreak painful violence on my hair follicles, why not kill them off once and for all? Over the years, as I've heard it, laser has been notoriously unreliable at working on darker skin tones. But Zizi points out the technology has advanced a long way. She'd like to train at using it herself. In the meantime, she's advocating herself out of an income, because she thinks it might be better for me.

Looking into laser hair removal, I find that Zizi is right – the technology has come a long way. The first company to create FDA-approved laser therapy was successfully sued by patients angry that, after undergoing the treatment, their hair had grown right back. The company quietly settled out of court and gradually went out of business.

Laser works by targeting the melanin found in hair. So long as the hair is darker than the skin around it, only the hair absorbs the light, not the surrounding skin. For years, this only worked well for people with light skin and dark hair. Eventually, scientists developed different wavelengths – short for lighter skins, and long for darker skin, where that contrast was less pronounced. But getting it wrong was no small thing. The potential side-effects include itching, redness, acne, hypo- or hyper-pigmentation and burning of the skin similar to sunburn.

Knowing this, who in their right mind would still even consider such a process? Who would take off their clothes, put on some dark glasses, and buckle up next to a machine knowing it will excite atoms to emit specific wavelengths of light, to target the melanin in their body hairs, with potentially dangerous results? Me, that's who.

In the time between deciding to try laser hair removal and actually getting it done, three things happened.

First, I turned 40. With that, came the second thing; a revelation. There are binary approaches to ageing, I realised. You can attempt to prevent it. Or you can embrace the physical, spiritual and emotional changes it entails.

Preventing it has never appealed to me. Although I grew up in the UK, I have been blessed with an inheritance in my mother's Ghanaian culture that has always presented older women as unrivalled in stature, and beauty. In my Akan heritage, to be young is to be a nobody. Old people are VIPs and status is accumulated with age. You cannot assume the most prestigious positions in the community or kingdom until you have passed certain milestones, you cannot mediate disputes until you have amassed wisdom, you cannot even fulfil the full stylistic potential of >

Keeping it real: Afua wears shirt by Jacquemus (mytheresa.com); skirt, ashish.co.uk; boots, dunelondon.com; earrings, emefacole.com; rings, shaunleane.com and nadaghazal.com



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