She led me to her kitchen table where she’d been straining sorrel. Its pungent aroma and the smell of steeping ginger filled the kitchen. When my tears came—a slow leak, a salty streak—she handed me a tissue and let me be for a few minutes. Miss Tillie knew if I was looking for comfort, I could go to Mama for that. She knew I was at her house for a reason. She set a cup of the sorrel in front of me, and I took a sip. It went down smooth and tangy and broke through the lump in my throat.

"I…I need help with my hair," I said.

Read Across America this month:

Hairstyles and how hair is cared for and adorned can convey powerful messages about a person’s identity, beliefs, and lifestyle. How you wear your hair can tell a lot about you as a person—and there are a lot of different ways to wear your hair! It’s important to celebrate one another for those differences and appreciate the person for who they are whether they have straight hair, curly hair, little or no hair, wear a hijab, or dreadlocks. Invite local hairstylists and barbers with experience with all types of hair to read My Hair Is a Garden and related titles then discuss with students how to care for different types of hair. Celebrate everyone’s hair with:

• photographs of the diverse hairstyles in your class/school made into a collage
• a book created by students that defines and illustrates the hairstyles worn in your school/community
• a Wacky Hair Day that encourages students to express themselves creatively
"Folks have been poking fun of my hair since I was little," I told Miss Tillie. "Mama’s tried to fix it, but the truth is, she doesn’t know what to do with it."

I could feel Miss Tillie’s hand on my thick nest of a head. That touch gave me hope.

I made a little song in my head.

Miss Tillie’s hair is shiny.
Miss Tillie’s hair is long.
She wears it as a crown
Like beauty wrapped in song.

You know, Miss Tillie’s hair has a glory!

Miss Tillie called my mama, who said I could stay there a while.

"Thirty or more years ago, I put some seeds in the ground," Miss Tillie said. "I planted cuttings from neighbors’ and friends’ trees. Bought a few plants and bulbs from catalogs."

I pointed to the tree Miss Tillie called a Japanese maple, the big one that draped gracefully over the garden. "That tree was a cutting?" I asked.

"Oh that was a wee thing at first. The phone company men came through the yard one day and trampled over it with their boots. Got in the way where they were sitting to have lunch. I found it plucked up clean and woven into the chain-link fence."

I gasped. "What did you do?"

"Ah!" she said. "Go back inside and put your towel back on."

That was the day I first learned that my hair is a garden.

Plan ahead for more Read Across America reading fun:

Host a Healthy Readers wellness fair to support student self-care and boost reading motivation and self-esteem. Work with parents, school counselors, P.E. teachers, yoga instructors, trainers, nutritionists, hair stylists, health care professionals, and others to deliver information about healthy eating, physical activity, and wellness resources to support members of your school community living well. Add interest and reading fun with read alouds and demonstrations and activities like instruction on foundational yoga poses and a reading of *The Happiest Tree: A Yoga Story* by Uma Krishmaswami; coaching on mindfulness and meditation following a reading of *The Sound of Silence* by Katrina Goldsaito; or a hair care demonstration and reading of *My Hair is a Garden* by Cozbi A. Cabrera.

Find more titles and resources to build student self-confidence at [readacrossamerica.org](http://readacrossamerica.org)