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Christie Tate

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CHRISTIE TATE

HAIR TIES

AN HOUR BEFORE my eighth birthday party, Mom appeared in my bathroom doorway to “work on my hair.” I’d been doing my own hair since I was five, but for special occasions—Easter, Christmas, roller skating parties—Mom got involved.

I couldn’t find my brush, so I borrowed my brother’s, the one with extra-soft bristles. Mom tried to make it work, but the pliable bristles wouldn’t catch my hair. She decided a ponytail would be best. But then I couldn’t find a hair tie. We were running out of time. Mom’s yanks made my eyes water; her sighs shook the walls. *Why couldn’t I keep track of the rubber bands? Why couldn’t I have beautiful hair? Why was it so hard for me to fit in the box labeled “girl”?*

Dad retreated down the hall, away from the pink-tiled bathroom that trapped me and Mom.

When my hair wouldn’t lie flat, Mom threw the ineffective brush across the bathroom. It broke into two pieces. We both stared at it. Me in fear, her in anger hardening into shame. “I guess there was a lot of hairspray in the bristles.” That was why it broke. That was one of the family fictions we needed to be able to escape from the bathroom and smile wide at the rink when my guests arrived.

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I CAN'T REMEMBER not wanting full-bodied, slightly curly, luscious hair; I pined for it, spent thousands of dollars trying to get it, and despaired that it was always out of reach. I don't hurt myself any longer in pursuit of it, but a trace of the longing remains like a scar. Just the other day, I caught myself admiring my co-worker's long black hair. She once told me that she weighed it on a scale (three pounds), and I thought of that every time I saw her. I also thought: I wish. After all this time—therapy, recovery, feminism, and distance—I still wish. Muscle memory.

I can't remember a time growing up when I thought of my hair as something other than a problem to fix. Too fine. Too thin. Too flat. Too boring. Too unexciting. Too much proof that I was a girl made wrong.

I can't remember not wishing for my sister's sunshine-on-straw hair that air-dried perfectly. So thick. So easy to style. So healthy. So perfectly Texas. So perfectly Daughter. So perfectly Girl.

I can't remember not wishing there were another way, something other than smelly perms, pink rollers, and hot irons; sighs and disappointment and crinkled brows; brushes and hairpins flung across the room in anger.



ONE WEEKEND, WHEN I was in fourth grade, Dad was in charge of everything at home because Mom was away for the weekend. I sat criss-cross in front of the TV while Dad brushed my hair. One hundred strokes on the right, and then on the left, and then in the back. He worked through the tangles, one strand at a time. No one had ever spent so much time on my hair. Dad said it was important to get the wispies to lie flat. I was only nine, but I knew to humor adults. Dad knew next to nothing about girls' hair—he'd never done mine before—and he'd lost all his hair in third grade after a bout of ringworm and it never grew back. Dad didn't attempt, as I knew he wouldn't, pigtails or braids, but he brushed my hair through two commercial breaks during Saturday morning cartoons. I felt like a daughter, perfectly made.



SEE MY LITTLE girl hair. Brown like a cup of winter cocoa made with water not milk. Long like the actress in the movie *Love Story*, extra-thin like a malnourished child. See me in the powder room just off the living room in the house where I grew up in Dallas, the one with the pink tiles and the long wooden vanity. On the wall by the light switch hangs a small wooden plaque with an Irish blessing. *May the road rise to meet you*. See me trying to get the part on my head straight. See me tugging on each pigtail to get them even: tug left, tug right, now left a little more, too much, now right again. See me undoing the rubber bands and trying again. Again and again. Each failure collects at and springs from my scalp. It feels like I'm not a girl, though not a boy either. I'm something in the middle. A smudge of not-quite-rightness.



GROWING UP, MY siblings and I would wait in the living room, watching mindless TV. Eventually, we'd ask Dad if we should tell Mom we were going to be late for our reservation, or the movie, or mass. Dad would shake his head: No. "She's working on her hair." It was code. Code for Mom hates her hair and can't make it do right. Code for don't walk down the hall, don't call out her name, and for God's sake, don't mention the time. We trained ourselves to stare at the screen. When Mom eventually appeared, smelling of Ysatis perfume and her latest hair potions, we would spring out of our seats as though we were grateful she had reminded us to get a move on.

When she traveled, Mom's carry-on suitcase was filled with brushes. Dozens of them. Round. Metal. Wooden-handled. Horse hair. Long, short, skinny, fat. Expensive, cheap. They lay like matchsticks, stacked row upon row. "It takes what it takes," she said when she caught us staring at her suitcase full of brushes.

Once, as we sat eating at a cafe in companionable silence—I was an adult and she was well into her sixth decade of life—my mother gazed out the window over my shoulder. “I really and truly hate my hair. I always have.” I said nothing, afraid to chase away the intimacy of the moment, the candor of her admission. I felt the line between us grow taut—all those hard-bristled brushes, all those heavy sighs in the bathroom, all the anxiety of trying to get it right. Woman, wife, daughter. I loved her for saying what I’d always known in my bones.



AS THE INTRODUCTORY ad played to the Oscar-award winning short film *Hair Love*, I imagined the plot. A little Black girl struggling to do her hair. Maybe it’s also about how our culture doesn’t always accept hair unless it’s long, luscious, golden, and sitting on top of a white head.

Wrong. *Hair Love* is about a little girl named Zuri who loves her natural hair. Her mother has recorded videos about various ways to style hair, and Zuri watches them, excited to pick one for herself. But she struggles to get it right. Her dad Stephen, who has locks of his own, also struggles with Zuri’s hair, which Matthew Cherry, the creator of *Hair Love*, describes as “having a mind of its own.” Both Zuri and Stephen are used to Mom doing Zuri’s hair. Stephen becomes frustrated and offers Zuri a red beanie. Devastated to be denied the hairstyle she so desperately wants, Zuri refuses the beanie and retreats to her room.

Stephen eventually works through his intimidation—they’re not shown, but I imagine deep breaths, the gathering of energy, his vow to see this through for Zuri. We indeed see Zuri emerge, proudly sporting the style she picked out. Then, the two of them arrive at what looks like a hospital to meet up with Mom, who greets them in a wheelchair. Mom unwinds a scarf to reveal a bald head; cancer is to blame for her absence at home. The family embraces.

A seven-minute video. Hair love.



IN MY EARLY twenties, I moved to Chicago and cut my hair Harry Potter short. A Texas girl's rebellion. It's very popular to get a new hair style after a break up, and I visualized myself as breaking up with Texas' brand of shiny femininity: the cheerleader aesthetic; the thin body, big boobs, full-hair mandate. My boy-wizard haircut was a quiet, personal fuck-off to beauty ideals that strangled me and my mother. It didn't cure my self-loathing to watch five inches of hair fall around me on the stylist's floor. But those scissors snip-snipping around the base of my neck, at my ears, by my temples? They sounded like liberation. The ticks of a combination lock on a safe about spring open. They sounded like choice. They felt like freedom.

I could choose any length I wanted. I could choose my own standards. I could build a new altar to kneel before. I could play with what it meant to be a woman and a daughter. I could invent a new vocabulary for beauty that included short brown hair. A definition that included me.



I LONGED TO know my mother's story, the spark that ignited her life-long hair battle. I knew she'd always wished for long, straight hair, a wish thwarted every day by the relentless Louisiana humidity that ensnared her thick curls. I know her mother cared about appearances—selecting the proper salad fork, earning perfect grades, joining the country club, and pledging the right sorority. I know her mother compared her to her older sister all her life, and my mom never believed she measured up. But there are gaps in her story, gaps where there should have been a narrative stitched with love. I want to ask what she felt like at age four, age eleven, age seventeen—when she stood in the mirror and did her hair before the bell rang at St. Joseph's Academy. Did someone make fun of her? Was it simply the burden of living in the shadow of a perfect sister? Wasn't she proud when she teased her hair

into a flawless bouffant in 1963?

I don't know the story to fill in the gaps, but I know what's missing was tenderness and celebration.

Someone should have taught her what it means to be adored. Someone should have made a shrine to her hair.

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WHEN I WAS admitted to the hospital with contractions, my three best friends flocked to my bedside to help me and my husband welcome my daughter. They cracked jokes and sang along to my playlist. They brought my husband pork bao for dinner. They slept on plastic couches in the lobby while we waited for the Pitocin to work its magic. After midnight, I developed a fever and our daughter's heartbeat dropped, so my OB prepped me for a C-section. It was 4:00 a.m., and the epidural had long worn off. The pain roaring through my body felt like it would split me open lengthwise.

As my husband pulled on the blue surgical scrubs, I lay on my side, breathing in jagged spurts. My friend Kara spread my hair out on the pillow behind me and began brushing. Scalp to tip. Her steady, gentle hand moving along my hair invited me into my motherhood. The motherhood of quiet celebration, of gentle hair brushes, of honoring pain and the past and bodies and hearts. She brushed my hair until they wheeled me away for my C-section and where I would welcome my daughter into the world.

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MY DAUGHTER WAS born with eyes as blue as the ocean teeming to the shore from a clear horizon. The eyes of my father and my husband's grandfather. By the time she was two, her hair had grown into wheat-colored ringlets—if you pulled them straight and then let go, they sprang back into their coils. *Boing!* Everyone commented. Those curls! I would kill for those curls! You're so lucky! You can *never* cut her hair!

I've always loved her hair and those exquisite and unexpected blue eyes that peer up at us, her two brown-eyed parents. When her hair is strewn across her pillow at bedtime, I touch it gently, holding the curls between my fingers like fine and fragile gems.

Since she was three years old, she's wanted to do her own hair, so I stepped aside. I still offer to brush it any time she wants. Every Mother's Day she gives me a handwritten coupon: *One free pass to do my hair whenever you want*. She allows me into the bathroom with her to blow dry or straighten her hair three or four times a year. The bathroom is cramped, there are toothpaste stains on the rim of the sink, the baseboards are matted with stray hairs, and still, these occasions feels like a sacrament. I touch her hair and feel the grace that has allowed me into the room with her to perform this sacred duty: by honoring her with tender brush strokes; by letting her tell me how she wants it done; by serving her with my hands and my labor. Some holy moments happen next to a leaky toilet.

When she was ten-years-old, my daughter wanted to chop off her hair. Twelve inches. A full foot. All those gorgeous waves of hair, all that girl-ness, and that her-ness. I stalled for a few days, insisting that she take the time to be certain about this drastic move. Really I stalled because I was afraid of how it would look and feel and how much I would miss that foot of hair and the version of my daughter I'd been looking at and adoring for most of her life. Two days, three days, four days. She never wavered, so I made the appointment. At the salon, I retreated to the waiting area so she could have her moment—her voice, her heart, her hair—with John, the bleach-blonde hairdresser with striped pencil-leg pants who listened carefully and asked a dozen questions before he pulled his scissors out of the drawer.

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THE THING ABOUT *Hair Love* that gets me is that there was another way. There was always another way. All that anger and frustration and pain and shame could have been turned in so many different directions. As the rage

rattled and shook the bathroom, Dad could have walked toward us. In the division of marital labor, he could have taken on my hair, relieving my mother of the burden.

My mother and I didn't have to choke on the hate and shame and self-loathing. We didn't have to turn that bathroom into another mother-daughter control story. We could have laughed. We could have panned out and looked at the ways in which we were drowning in culture's toxic norms, norms she learned partly from her own mother. We could have charted a new course, a slanted path with hair pin turns that carried us out of the thicket of blonde, long, silky, full, luscious, thick. We could have insisted on a different ending. We could have fought not for control but for connection, cooperation, collaboration. We could have brought some red-balloon-soaring, let's-celebrate energy to my scalp. We could have insisted on love. We could have.

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ON THE WHITE Ikea shelf above my desk, I've constructed a writing shrine. It was an assignment from a writing workshop I took with a teacher who used tarot cards as writing prompts and who earnestly referred to herself as a "witch." We were to create a shrine in our writing spaces. In the center of mine lies a nest of hair. My daughter's former ponytail. After the stylist snipped it off, the receptionist asked if I wanted to keep it. I nodded, and she gathered up the strands, bound them with a rubber band, and slipped them into a shopping bag. *Here you go, Mom.* As soon as we got home, I placed the hair on my shrine.

Why? My daughter wanted to know.

This is how I adore you, how I love you, and how I set you free. Me too, actually.

All at once? she asked.

Yes, I answered.