Hairdo

Nixa Schell
I am always the TWA stewardess named Coni. Spelled that way, with the circle-dotted i at the end. My hair is ice-blonde and shapes to my head like a football helmet: thick eyebrow-length bangs straight across and the rest in a perfect bubble cap so the hairs move together in slow motion and then fall back into the helmet shape again. It is hair just like Ken Berry’s girlfriend wears on Mayberry RFD and my lips are Yardley’s Love-Soft-Peach. My name is always Coni. And I am not a homo. They don’t let homos be stewardesses for TWA, and Marsha and I have never kissed on the lips.

First I climb the tree in my backyard to the branch where I keep the cans. Then I make Marsha come up by the branches for footholds and not the nailed boards like she always wants to. Holly is next door in her bedroom. I see her roll a long section of her hair onto a Donald Duck orange juice can, twelve ounce. So far I have three cans. Each one hangs on a separate twig in the tree, hidden away so Wanda, my mother, won’t know. From where I sit, I could put my foot on Marsha’s head. But I don’t.

I am Coni and Marsha is Ken. Coffee, tea or me, I say, don’t smoke and fasten your seatbelts and the bag goes on your face like this when you want to vomit. Ken pushes his button. He says his seatbelt is stuck. I bend over to see what the problem is and Ken jerks me down and kisses me. No, he doesn’t kiss me yet. I won’t help because I don’t like him. Now Marsha is both Ken and Judy, the other stewardess. Judy flirts with Ken while she fiddles with his seatbelt and kisses him like this: Marsha turns her back and crosses her arms so her fingers come around as Judy’s on Ken’s neck, and she moves her head to show passion. And I think Ken loves Judy. I ignore him with my meal cart in the aisle. Ken writes me a note on a cocktail napkin. It says: Meet me in the bathroom! Ken! In the bathroom together we whisper each other’s names, put our hands over our mouths and Marsha and I hand kiss, moving our heads from side to side until we almost fall off
It is the show where Gilligan and Ginger get lost in the cave and the gorilla is about to come in there with them. On her stomach next to me, Marsha copies how I have my chin on the pillow with Yosemite Falls painted on it. I let the phone ring four times before I turn off the sound and bother to get up and answer it.

Like always Wanda calls me Helen and says, you're not watching the tee-vee. You're reading the California History homework. Don't eat. Change those filthy sheets of yours.

A hair dryer is going behind her voice. On the pad that says Notes From Wanda across the top I write "piss" all in capitals and scratch it out.

That tee-vee won't be on when I get home this time.

I say, moth-er. My appointment's here. Change your sheets. Byee-byee, she says, making her voice cute at the end.

The sound is back up and Gilligan and Ginger are pawing each other now. Gilligan is the one she leans her big boobs on to this show. I say falsies and Marsha shakes me, they're real, and Gilligan is jumping all over the place. You can tell he likes it. I know that when the show is off he sneaks into Ginger and Marianne's hut to catch them in just their nighties. I tell Marsha, I'm Gilligan and you're Ginger and we hand kiss right there on the living room rug. We know the gorilla is really the Skipper in disguise, so we keep at it without looking up all the way through the credits and theme song. I feel like I have to pee.

After Gilligan, I push in the tv button and unplug it. Wanda will be here in an hour and check to see if it's warm, but it will cool down by then. Marsha's gone home, so I make a honey graham and Oleo margarine sandwich and eat it over the sink. I eat three more with two glasses of Donald Duck orange juice. Then I rinse the evidence down the drain.
Dad drinks Brown Derby beer with his supper, Wanda has Cragmont diet cherry soda, and I have a glass of Donald Duck. Her neck jiggles when her lips move. She has a chicken leg in her hand that she pushes potato onto her spoon with.

Those women, she says, they give me a giant pain.

The Miracle Whip dot at the corner of her mouth reminds me of pus and I shove the macaroni salad out to the edge of my plate. There is always too much Miracle Whip in it.

They think they know what their look is, she says, catching the dot with the tip of her tongue. It's perm and rat, perm and rat, all day and I tell them—she leans way over her plate and tilts her head to the side so the chicken grease on her cheek shines as she takes potato into her tiny mouth—I say, shags are in. Shags are the thing. But no, never that. Give me the usual, they say, give me a perm, and rat it up good.

She huffs her breath out and takes in some soda. It leaves cherry smile marks past her lips. I just stare at her cheek. This is the time of day when all the body goes out of her hair so it separates where her ears are.

If you're going to set there jaw slack and hair in your face, she says, you may as well excuse yourself and take your plate with you to the sink.

Dad says to her, take a swipe at your left cheek there, babycake. A nice shag haircut, she says rubbing with her napkin, be the thing for Helen. A cool summer cut like all the high school girls ask for.

After I hook my hair behind my ears so it's out of my face I start clearing the table.

When I hear Bob Barker reunite the soldier boy with his girl from Fresno, the Truth or Consequences song playing above the audience, I have all but the pots rinsed. I leave them for later and hurry to my tv spot. Spread on her recliner that used to be for washing hair at the Beauty Bar, Wanda says she'll inspect. My chin settles on Yosemite Falls.

Even the pots, she says.
Cartoon Jeannie dances in waves past Major Nelson. He gets whirlly eyes when she kisses him on the cheek and then sucks out long and weird, hair first into the bottle. The cartoon is the only time Major Nelson likes to let her kiss him. In real life he makes her vacuum.

She could be my slave, dad says from the couch, sure as sunshine wouldn't have that pony pushing any vacuum.

Wanda gives the look like seeing filth rings on my white knee socks. You've got your slave right here already, she says, her mouth smaller than it really is.

Without looking dad says, Tootie, run open me a Brown Derby at commercial. When I do he says to take the first sip. Wanda gives the look. He doesn't see but knows and says, Brown Derbies aren't drinking.

Dad's mouth opens from his head leaning back. When he lets out a snort, I jab his arm hard with my foot. It's Love American Style for as long as I can hear Wanda's bath water running. With Wanda in the tub I go overtime on her one-show rule. The old man laughs slow, huh, huh, huh, and the woman wears red, white and blue hotpants and thigh boots and you know it's dirty. I hear the faucet whine closed and turn the tv sound off fast. Right away Wanda calls behind the door, Helen you're brushing your teeth before bed. The old man on the tv sneaks to the redhead by the pool. Helen. As I go to push the button, the redhead grabs his tie just in time so they both fall in.

Her hair pokes out of the plastic thing with the elastic edge for covering bowls. In the spot I rub clear on the mirror I can see the green parrot washrag just covering her chest. Marsha came over today I suppose, she says to the ceiling with her eyes closed.

No, I say.

Play without that touching business. Promise.

Mother, I say. She's always asking from the hall in her hair dryer.
voice: what are you two doing so long in there that you can't keep the
door open. Hand kissing isn't touching lips. Why do you have to close
the door, she always says. I sit and pee and watch the island her
stomach makes, first big and then little with her breathing.
And you know just what I'm getting at without my having to tell
you straight out.
I want to touch the erosion marks around her bellybutton.
You two don't kiss on the mouths.
In the bathtub like this she has no chin and her face makes an
automatic frown into her neck. The steam unsticks the eyelashes from
her eyelid, leaving behind the others, a row of baby ones. She
straightens up, dangling the washrag like a curtain on her chest.
I said: you-don't-kiss-Marsha-on-the-mouth. Do you. It is like
she's been crying with the black melting down under her eyes.
No-o, I say, wiping from front to back because she is watching.

I call the Beauty Bar and ask to please speak to Wanda.
Hey Tootie, Joy says, what's doing?
Nothing, I say.
Hang on. Her hand is on the receiver and then I hear Wanda's
breathing.
Helen hon, she says, just a sec. Where the feather bouquet, the red
and pink, is setting Arlene. Take that chair. Hot as a skillet in here,
she says into the phone. Ok now, quick tell me what you want.
Can I sleep over at Marsha's, I say.
Home before noon, she says, the sheets will wait, but those pots
won't be on the stove when I get home today, hear me. We can cut
that mop of yours tomorrow while I've got time for it.
Marsha yanks my arm, canyou, canyou, canyou.
I guess so, I say and we go out Marsha's back door.

From Marsha's tree we see the top of mine two houses down. The
house between is where Holly lives. She's in her bedroom, talking on
the phone.

Marsha says, when our trees grow some more the branches will connect and we can crawl across into each other's trees.

I say, don't count on it. Holly is on the floor and kicking up one foot. Her sock is starting to come off.

I am Vince and Marsha is her mother, Loretta. We're on the train to Reno. The train goes through the tunnel so it's dark suddenly and I jump on Loretta and kiss her. No, I don't kiss her yet. Loretta says, stop it Vince, what about Marsha. The only thing that matters is us, I say. Let's get married in Reno, Loretta says. Come on, I say, you know my wife won't give me a divorce. We must never tell Marsha about your wife. Forget Marsha, I say. Oh Loretta! Can't you see I'm dying for you! Let's do it now! Marsha goes for me with her hand over her mouth. Wait, I say and get the Oleo tub cover out of my back pocket, we can use this instead. I almost feel Marsha's lips through the plastic. She closes her eyes, but I look over her shoulder. Still on the phone, Holly brushes her hair upside down and her surfer shirt creeps up so I see the sliver of her bare back even from up here.

Vince takes Loretta dancing at the Chateau Room and Holly comes over to watch Marsha and me. While Marsha has the hair dryer on in the living room, I am in the bathroom with Holly getting my hair done.

Always start at the bottom when you comb and never brush it wet, Holly says, then you don't get split ends.

I can hardly feel it when she combs the tangles out. Use the Donald Duck cans for mine, I say.

Not yet. Your hair needs to grow to where it wraps around twice, she says, lucky you to have such straight hair. She uses her fingernail to divide my hair into sections. Poor Marsha could never get her kink out, not even ironing it, she says, then she scoops two fingers of Dippity-Doo out of the jar.
Gob on some more, I say.

Mickey Dolenz irons his hair, she says, bobbypin. She holds out her hand while I find one that still has its plastic tips. Your hair is so thick I might not have enough rollers. By the end of the summer, she says into the mirror, it should reach around the Donald Duck cans. Her lips are Yardley's Love-Soft-White. All the popular girls wear white lipstick now, she says.

Make sure it flips up, I say.

They put you in the garbage bin on your first day of high school, she says. Holly's eyelashes are long and black and she doesn't need mascara.

When Holly finally falls asleep on the floor next to us. I sneak the channel to Psycho, but the scene in the shower is already over with. We stay up until Vince and Loretta get back. Loretta pays Holly and tells her to put the money where she won't lose track of it this time, in with her curlers or something. Then Loretta sends us to bed.

I make Marsha keep the door open so we can listen better. Like always, Marsha falls asleep right away and I'm awake, straining to hear what's going on in the living room. I take three or four trips to the bathroom, and once I look around the corner when I don't hear them talking. They are kissing and Vince has his fingers in her hair. His eyes are closed. With the other hand he goes up and down on the outside of her sweater like he's feeling for her bra. I touch my own hair. It is stiff from the Aqua Net sprayed on to keep the flip in. I think he sees me when they stop for air and I rush into the bathroom. This time I really have to go, but nothing comes out.

There is the ashtray full of cigarette butts stinking on the coffee table when I get up. I put it way over by the fish tank and turn cartoons on low. Marsha comes in at the end of Bullwinkle and I tell her about what she missed last night. Vince and Loretta are making out on the couch, I say, and he says he has an idea, to wait here while he goes to the Stop and Save. Vince comes back and pulls a Playboy out of the bag. Look here what I got, he says to Loretta and she says,
what's that for. Just wait and see. He opens the centerfold and lays it on the coffee table.

What was in the picture, Marsha says and I know she believes me when she looks around to see if the Playboy is still here.

He unfolds the centerfold and I see a naked man and woman. The man in the picture is on top and Vince says to Loretta, that's us. And they get in the exact same position on the couch, copying the centerfold. Marsha looks at cartoons for a while and then whispers, I hate Vince. I say, so do I. The set has gone out of Marsha's hair and now it's nothing but frizz. I want to tell her it will never be like Holly's hair.

Before I go home I stop into the Stop and Save. I pick out a twelve ounce Donald Duck and pay for it with the seventy-five cents dad gave me for pulling up dandelions. I sneak a look at the magazine stand on my way out the door, but there aren't any Playboys.

I'm home at three and there's a note from Wanda: Dad's at the bowling tournament and I'm at Joy's getting a frost. What about the pots! Mom. I pour the last of the Donald Duck into a glass and open the new can. The hot water in the first measure makes the lump melt faster so I don't have to stir as much. I open the other end and wash the can twice. Then I hide it behind the Yosemite pillow on the couch while I watch the Monkey's Show. At the commercial, I refill with the fresh Donald Duck. I take a package of honey grahams back into the living room with me. Pretty soon I'm dipping the last one into my juice and a teenage girl is trying to kiss Davy Jones. By the look on his face I know Davy doesn't like her. You can barely see the little glass slide they put between them on tv to make the kissing look real. They manage to sneak it between their lips so fast that you don't even know they do it. The car door slams and I almost don't get to the button in time. I brush the crumbs off the couch and shove the honey graham wrapper into my shorts pocket.
Wanda goes straight into the bathroom, screaming for me to get in that kitchen and wash those pots. She slams the bathroom door. When the pots are draining I go into the bathroom. They're done, now can I watch tv, I say. Her hair has orange streaks in it and she's ratting at it like it will take the color out. What happened, I say. Just what do you think, she says, what in hell does it look like. And when I tell her it looks like troll hair, she slaps me on the bare leg with her rattail comb, says to get my own hair combed out because she's getting to me when she's done.
I'm growing it out, I say, but she just goes on ratting. Shutting the door behind me, I hear her cry, huh, huh, huh. I get the can from under the pillow and take it with me outside.

Holly's walking around her bedroom in her bra. There are circles on the cups that make them look like bullseyes. My hair isn't so stiff now and I try to get a section all the way around the can, but it won't fit.
Helen, Wanda yells, get down from there this second. I just hang the can on a twig near the others. In four more hours Wanda will have given up and gone to bed. The lights will be off in our house. I'll climb down and then over the fence. Holly will leave her window open for me and say, Coni, is that you?