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Isn't This What You Wanted?

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Isn't This What You Wanted?

SOPHIA A. KENNY

The stench of my hair burning fills my nostrils, it smells like popcorn. If I close my eyes I can see the kernels bouncing on the glass, slamming against each other, trying to break free. I am used to the pain. The zap of hair removal doesn't make me flinch, doesn't make me tear up like getting my eyebrows threaded. This is faster, one zap, and it's like the hair lining my lip was never there. The feeling has been likened to that of snapping a rubber band on your skin. Shocking. Even more so when you can't see it coming. Over my eyes lay a washcloth, blinding me from the laser—the goal is to lose your body hair, not your eyesight.

After her last zap, my mom would pat my leg. “You're done,” she would say; and I could practically hear the smile on her face. There's something about mothers of daughters, they find pleasure in the relationship between beauty and pain.

Moving the washcloth off of my face, I open my eyes. Slowly my eyes adjust to the yellow light and her familiar popcorn ceiling appears. I sit up and look at her. Depending on who you ask, we do not look alike. We both have the same midnight black hair, but there is more contrast on my skin. While my skin has always been somewhat pale, she has skin the color of her favorite latte. Our hair color stands out on my skin, ready to take center stage.

It's an old wives' tale that if you have heartburn during pregnancy, your baby will be born with a full head of hair. My mom's chest must have been a furnace throughout her pregnancy because I was born with a head full of black hair. Maybe this contrast was beautiful on my head as a baby—before it started growing in all the wrong places.

In a fifth-grade classroom, I sat across from a boy with curly blonde hair and a rambunctious personality. The room was filled with other elementary schoolboys, and I was one of the only girls, if not the only one. The blonde boy stared at me one day, really examining me. He looked me up and down, dissecting my soul and what makes me tick.

“Why do you have a mustache?”

He said it so plainly as if he had asked me where my shirt was from, why I had a ham and cheese sandwich for lunch. These had simple answers, Gap Kids, and because my dad likes them. How does an eleven-year-old girl answer why she has a mustache? Does she explain genetics to him? That every girl has a bit of fuzz on their upper lip if you look close enough? I don't know what she says, I don't know what I say.

All I know is the feeling of my stomach on the floor. How I feel like my cat, with a hairball stuck in her throat. My chest lit up as if it were on fire. The boy looks back at me, a grin plastered on his face as if he had told me I was pretty. I did not need to give him a biology lesson, the gleam in his eyes made it clear to me that he did not care. He just wanted to see the look on my face, confidence zapped from my expression. He wanted me to feel like a freak.

I was in eighth grade when I had my first “boyfriend.” It was truly nothing, just excitement over the fact that someone could like you. A mutual friend was performing in a play at her new school, which seemed like the perfect time to visit her. My dad volunteered reluctantly to drive us in his Lincoln. Being middle schoolers, we both invited our best friends. It was a very exciting day, I was practically jumping for joy in my seat as my friends piled in one after another onto the leather seats.

My best friend sat in the passenger seat, politely allowing me to sit next to the boyfriend. He sat wedged between me and his best friend, so, unfortunately, I was practically alone. While the boys chatted and laughed next to me, my best friend and I passed our phones back and forth, showing each other Instagram posts we thought were funny.

She reached her arm back towards me, her pink painted nails rubbing against my shaved knee. My boyfriend looked at her, and his eyes darted to his best friend. His eyes had that dissecting gleam in them, choosing his words haphazardly. He said her name, calling her attention to the backseat, where he stared at her, ready to unleash his joke.

“You have gorilla arms.”

So plainly said, just like the boy in fifth grade. My boyfriend looked to his best friend for approval, and the two of them laughed at her expense. She probably yelled at him, but it's hard to remember. I felt his words sting as if they were pointed to me, and I looked down at my arms. Are they hairy? I asked myself, rubbing my fingers against the thin hairs that sprouted above my skin, like crops just after planting season. I felt my face ignite in flames. I bit my lip as the argument and biology lesson ended, and

pulled down my sleeves.

I've never been to a circus Freakshow, the ones that utilize animal cruelty and "othering" to make a quick buck. But I've heard enough stories to know about the Famous Bearded Lady. Guests flock to gaze at her and her facial hair as they munch happily on popcorn. After dehumanizing and belittling her, the guests go on to the next exhibit. They may forget her, but their words will be etched into her DNA like the genes that gave her hair. If this was the attention my average body hair got, I couldn't even fathom how much worse it could be. I found myself happy that I wasn't the Bearded Lady. Hoping I would never be a freak.

My sophomore year of high school, I invited my friend, Jen, over to my house to dye my hair. The two of us scurried to the nearest pharmacy and cased the entire hair care aisle looking for the perfect dye. Settling on hot pink, I grabbed two boxes. We walked back to my house after checking out, a soundtrack of nervous giggles about how my hair would turn out narrating the journey.

The two of us sat on my carpet as she painted my hair with bleach. Drops fell onto my dirty blue carpet, but I didn't mind, I enjoyed the mess as long as I could control my hair. This is the opposite of the laser, I thought, but its purpose was the same. They alter hair, they make you prettier and cooler. No man could make fun of my femininity if I was the standard they created. After my head was painted in chemicals I had to sit and wait for it to burn the color from my hair off. My scalp itched for what seemed like hours, burned like the popcorn on my lip. After it was finished I got in the shower and washed it away, leaving my hair a brassy yellow. My hair felt like straw between my fingertips. It looked like how I felt after being made fun of, completely stripped. Next, she smothered my yellow hair with pink dye, saturating each strand. After the allotted time, I stood in the shower and watched the remainder of the pink dye travel down the drain. So easily removed from my situation, like it didn't want to be involved with my hair.

At some point in my junior year of high school, clumps of hair swirled around the shower drain. Unlike the stream of pink dye, I felt a lump in my throat when the pink wads stared back up at me in horror. You would think, as my hair started to thin, I would do everything in my power to save it. But I kept dyeing it, as the pink would always fade. The more chemicals I covered in my hair, the weaker the strands became.

Is it possible for hair dye to seep into your brain? I think the pink

dye found its way in and took hold. The pink hair was my personality, something that made me stand out, made me feel more like me. Some people recognized me for the hair, and I would get compliments throughout the day over its hue. Some were positive, a girl on the street passing by with a sincere, "I like your hair!" I'd always reply with a compliment back, something about her shoes, or her hair if it was also dyed. At times, it's nice to stand out. When you're a shy high school student who looks like everyone else, for example.

But having the color of a Sharpie highlighter on your head can invoke strange men to prey on you. I was taking a summer class at Baruch College right after I dyed my hair, and I sat outside reading *The Handmaid's Tale* as I munched on my salad for lunch. It was a peaceful day, early summer. Not too hot, but the sunlight was the perfect addition to the afternoon.

A thirty-something-year-old man walked up the street towards me and sat down.

"What are you reading?" he asked. I didn't reply, hoping he was talking to someone else. I flipped the page. "I'm talking to you, pink hair," he said, louder this time. I then looked up at him, and then around, to see if anyone else was around the outdoor seating area. I answered his question and went back to my book, hoping that was it.

"How old are you?" He asked. What I say is fifteen. I wanted to add, half your age afterward but decided against it.

"What's your name?" He asked. That's unimportant, so I stop answering. He gets pissed off at this point and gets in my face. "Don't be such a bitch, princess. Your boyfriend must be a real lucky guy."

He said that last bit with some venom and left, but for the rest of the day, I was looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to recognize me.

My natural black hair acts as a mask, a disguise, allowing me to slip into the background anywhere I go. It's near impossible to stand out when you look like everyone else. But bright pink hair? That gets your attention as if there were a beard on my chin. But society sees this as positive attention. Stares are okay when they fit the standard. Hair is okay when it's on your scalp. Regardless of what I do—fit the standard, rebel against it—it seems that I will always be stared at. My hair never ceases to be a topic of conversation.

The clumps started to come out naturally, but I started to tear them out too. It started as innocently twirling my hair in A.P. U.S. History, a tool to concentrate as I listened to the teacher. Pink strands littered the floor

under my seat, enough to make a wig. Soon my hands reached up to comb through my hair, and as I pulled down, my fingers caught little knots, tangles, inconsistencies to nice hair. I pulled harder and listened to the strand let go of my scalp. The satisfying rip. Maybe you've noticed when I pick up a lock of hair, twist and pull at it to tear away the split ends. At the end of class, I look down and see all the little hairs on my lap and feel disgust wash over me. I push the hair off of me onto the floor, soon to be swept away and forgotten about. My head is a bit lighter now.

In the shower, I grab my bottle of shampoo and squeeze a dollop onto my palm, before returning the bottle to its precarious place on the bathtub ledge. I work the shampoo into my scalp and realize with a flinch that the water is hurting me. I press my fingertip into my scalp and rub the spot that hurts. When I pull away, blood washes off of my finger and down the drain. I've been pulling at my scalp so much that it has become irritated, scabbing and bleeding in retaliation. What do you even do about this, except clench your jaw to finish the shower?

The color of my hair has changed—from dark brown to black, to hints of highlights. No matter the color, I continue to rip hairs out of my head all the same. I wish I could tell you why I do this to myself. My family and friends think that it's stress. Maybe it's a little fidget I do, like how you tap your pencil on the desk when you try to work out a math problem. The difference between you and me, then, is that my fidget is destructive, pulling apart what society and I so desperately want. I've tried other ways to keep my hands occupied, but my hands always end up in my hair. Flames of hatred burn within me every time I return to this habit. Nothing feels the same, nothing feels as satisfying.

Looking in the mirror at the remnants of what used to be a thick head of hair, I search for what went wrong. I was blessed with such nice hair, now it's tearing like a piece of tissue paper, breaking apart and falling out. I feel like a freak with this compulsion.

But isn't this what you wanted?