

Combing Through

PENNY KITTLE

When Hannah was born on a Thursday afternoon in the gentle light of June, she had orangey curls clustered like Rotini across the crown of her scalp. They sprung back when I held them in my fingers, and I smiled at her blue eyes fixed on mine. I had always wanted curls; I have hair like straw. Hannah, wrapped in a soft pink blanket, my only daughter, my only one, had lovely curls. I ran my cheek across her hair, soft as a whisper; it was a prized surprise of motherhood.

Two years later there were dogs and ducks to sit upon, scattered around a shop like a broken merry-go-round. The children were giggling, hair dryers were blowing, scissors were snipping, and Hannah was squeezing my hand while she crawled into my lap and snuggled against my chest.

“Hannah,” I rocked her, “do you still want to do this?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, “You’re okay?”

“Yes!” insistent and fierce, Hannah was fiery like her hair.

She had decided it was time for a haircut, and this was the place to go, my neighbors assured me. But when a bubblegum-snapping hairstylist combed her curls, Hannah clenched the duck’s bill and tears slid in streams down her cheeks.

The first wail came soon after the first snip. The girl worked quickly, trying to comfort and trim bangs simultaneously, but Hannah was winding up for a furious scream. I rose to my feet.

“Mommy . . .” she moaned, “she’s hurting me.”

Now we were in, of course. I couldn’t stop the haircut with half the job done. “It’s okay, sweetie, we’ll be done in just a minute,” I tried, but I knew this never worked with Hannah. Once she decided she wanted something, good luck dissuading her.

“MOMMY—” she shook with anger, “IT HURTS!” and now her wails and sobs had the attention of everyone in the place, even over the howling of the hairdryers.

The manager scuttled over and pulled me aside, “I’m sorry. You have to get her out of here. She’s scaring the other customers.” We left with an uneven fringe hanging across her eyebrows. It would take me days to finish the job. Hannah and her hair: it was somehow worth the trouble.

By age 11 it was mostly blonde. It was auburn when wet, but slowly gathered the light of the sun as it dried. Hannah curled it into luscious waves most mornings, but complained that blonde was ordinary and begged to dye it brown.

"You've got to be kidding," I countered, "people pay good money for this color. No way. I'm not spending mine ruining it."

My husband jumped in, "Not a chance, Hannah."

She scowled at him and flashed her eyes. "I'll do it myself." Of course she would. Hannah was always in charge: she would write her own story most days, my husband and I just along for revision and suggestions. After a moment of dark silence she asked, "How much does it cost?"

"Well," I hesitated, "I bet it'll be a hundred dollars or more to have it done," I searched for ways to discourage her. "And you'll have to do it every month to keep it brown because your hair will grow back blonde. I can assure you, Dad and I won't pay a cent. We love your hair."

We won that round. I was stunned that she'd considered it. Holding her thick hair as I pulled it into a ponytail, I wished it were mine.

It is morning years later, still dark in the midst of winter, and Hannah slides into the driver's seat. She adjusts the mirrors and fiddles with her coat, delaying a shift to reverse. Our curving driveway disorients her; she has mowed down snow stakes trying to get a feel for the movement of the wheels beneath her hands.

She begins slowly, reaching around to peer behind her as she eases the car out of the garage. I'm used to this part and not paying much attention until I glance to my right and see her cranking the front wheel into my Mini Cooper.

"Stop! Stop! Stop stop STOP! Dammit!" I'm still wailing even as we jerk to a halt just inches from contact. "Dammit, Hannah, you almost creamed my car."

She's silent. She hates to fail.

"You have to look," I say, "you have to look out the back AND out the front; I've told you this." I know now I should just shut up. This isn't helping, but I'm still barking. "You go straight until you've cleared the garage. You just missed my car!"

She is silent.

I breathe.

"Pull back in and let's try again," I sigh.

There is something cruel about being forced to teach her to drive just when our relationship is most tenuous. I begin each day coaching her as we barrel down the highway on our way to school. Too many days begin like this one: I howl, she sinks against the seat, scowls, and we start again.

I think of a moment just before we got into the car, back at our kitchen counter. I hear her call, “Mom, will you do my hair?” and try not to pull as I run the frog prince hairbrush down the length of her scalp to the tips of her strawberry-blonde hair, gleaming in the dim, pre-dawn light. I hold that damp hair in both hands and breathe in motherhood. It used to be bigger somehow: teaching her to read and holding her all night when her ears were filled with fluid. Today it is buying her favorite cereal and helping her study for biology. She rushes off to the movies instead of curling into my lap with *Cinderella*.

She’s almost 16, but today, still, I am braiding her beautiful hair.