

When I came home from my friend's house on Tuesday morning, I had shaved my head. No more hair.

When my mother saw me—she was still in her bathrobe, mascara smears from late night Ambien stirring, picking at her eyelashes then wiping the black residue on her bathrobe— she gasped.

“What did you do?” she asked, staring.

“I shaved my head.”

“Why? Do you have cancer?” she attempted a joke.

“Mom,” I said, setting down my bag on the kitchen table.

“Well? Don't you want to be pretty?”

“What?”

“You look like one of those prison lesbians. Are you trying to tell us something?”

“Jesus, Mom! No, just chill out.”

My brother came into the kitchen, also still in his bathrobe.

“What the fuck?” he said. “Oh, you shaved your head.”

I didn't reply.

“I just don't get it,” Mom said.

“What's the big deal?”

“You had such beautiful hair.”

“At least less of it will clog the shower drain now,” Lou smiled. “Eh, where's the strawberry jam?”

“In the back,” Mom said, waving one of her to-do lists in front of her face.

“You'll regret this, you know,” she said, pointing a pen at me. “You'll look back and think, oh why did I shave my beautiful hair off? Why did I want to be ugly?”

“Ugly? Mom, *ugly*?”

“Just make sure you don't wear any baggy clothes now, or you will really look like a prison lesbian. Is it the show you watch? Do you think it's cool to have a shaved head?” But before I could respond she turned around, turning the pen shake at Lou, “I told you, Lou. In the back, right behind— okay, use your eyes.”

Mom sifted through the mail on the counter, selecting a rather festive looking card.

“What's this?” she said, “Another card from your father?”

Our father, also Louis, remarried almost two years ago, to a much younger woman, who was now pregnant with a baby boy. (“A younger woman, huh? That's original,” Mom had remarked at their announcement to wed.)

Mom opened it and pulled out a card with a patterned border and three squares where smiling faces are pictured, with the announcement, “It's a boy!”

The card was blue, with blue shoes pictured on some sort of sheepskin rug in one corner. A blue truck drove across the bottom of the card. Louis and his young wife sat on a small (blue) loveseat together, her pregnant belly announcing itself.

“Oh, a boy!” Mom said, when all three of us hovered in the kitchen, over the beloved blue boy. “Well, Lou, it's a shame, he can't also name this boy after himself.”

This was one of Mom's favorite jokes after she and Louis divorced. It became a joke so quickly after he moved out that we had a feeling she wanted to make this joke all along, for so many years, that it must've been the heaviest relief to finally expel it.

“You know,” Mom began, slapping the picture with her right hand against the open palm of her left. “I used to be pretty like that, too.”

Lou rolled his eyes, “Who cares!”

“I do,” she said. “It’s important for a woman to feel pretty.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Except you, apparently,” she replied, smiling the way she does when she knows what she says will piss me off, but she just can’t help herself.

“I swear I can still fit into my wedding dress,” she lifted her chin up in a haughty sort of way she was never able to sincerely embody.

“You still have the wedding dress? Even though you’re divorced?” I asked, incredulously.

“A bride’s dress has nothing to do with the husband,” she replied, rather wickedly.

“Isn’t that choice,” Lou said, peering into the cabinets for food.

“How would you understand?” she asked, adding another line to her to-do list. “You know nothing about life, you haven’t experienced pain yet. You haven’t done anything.”

“I smoked weed in the hottub last weekend when you were out with your friends,” Lou cackled, scooping the peanut butter he found with pretzels, smashing his hand as far into the jar as possible, instead of using a knife.

“You can smoke weed in the hottub, but don’t you have sex in it!” Mom yelled after him. Then, “Are you still a virgin? Is that why your hair is cut like that?”

“Jesus, Mom!”

She shrugged and pursed her lips, putting her hands up, like she just didn’t know, “I don’t get it.” She touched my face with her open palm, “Eh, you’re a girl. Act like one, look like one. You’re not doing yourself any favors with that bald scalp.”

I rolled my eyes then glanced at the baby announcement.

IT’S A BOY!

“Mhm,” she said, eating carrots out of the open bag in the vegetable drawer, “What could be more exciting than a boy, huh?”

I didn’t reply. I knew she must have felt somewhat sad.

“I’m calling the pharmacy, honey,” she said, dialing the number already, talking into the phone and to me at the same time, “I’m refilling my Ambien. My doctor needs to up the dosage because I can’t sleep lately. I thought it was the full moon, you know? But the full moon is gone now. Another cycle. How would I know? I have no uterus, but my body knows. Yeah—” she looks away from me, “I need to refill my prescription. Last name Arthur.”

Arthur is Louis’ last name. Mom didn’t chop it off after they got divorced.

“Too much work,” she’d said, “I’ve done enough already. Getting divorced is a full-time job. I’ve had the name for so long, who cares now? I’m an Arthur still. It’s my name, too. Don’t change your name when you get married. I’m telling you.”

When she hung up the phone she turned to me, in her bathrobe, with the mascara stains on her right shoulder, “Can you go get my prescription? It’s at Walgreens. Do you have time?”

“Sure, Mom.”

She handed me the keys, crossing off a line on her to-do list.

“Okay, sweetie,” she said, waving me out the door. “Wait just a minute. Will you also get me the honey lemon flavored Halls cough drops? Don’t worry I’m not sick. I just like the taste. That’s how I quit smoking in the 80s, you know? None of that nicotine crap. I sucked on a lot of Halls honey and lemon.”

“Okay, Mom,” I said, laughing.

“Sometimes, I need a cigarette. Well, I always need a cigarette. Just because you quit doesn’t mean you don’t want it! That’s addiction. Eh, okay,” she kissed me on the cheek. “Look, your hair’s growing back!”

“Mom,” I said, shrugging.

I drove to the pharmacy in my car, so I could smoke a joint in the parking lot of the library with Frank, my sometimes boyfriend who worked as a volunteer librarian. He said it would help with his college applications, but we both knew he was planning on going to community college, and the volunteering was just to get out of his parents’ house.

I went into Walgreens, pop music radio playing softly and fluorescent lights. I went to the corner of the store where the pharmacy was situated, like an awkward armchair in someone’s living room no one ever sits in.

“I’m picking up a prescription for Arthur,” I told the pharmacist.

“That’s the last name?” he said, staring at me with the kind of blue eyes that certainly were suspiciously dazzling for a pharmacist. When he turned around to grab the bag with my mother’s Ambien, I pictured him in a porno flick, maybe with two other women in a Hawaiian cottage somewhere.

“Thanks,” I said. “Oh, wait. Uh, where are the yeast infection suppositories?”

“Aisle 9.”

I didn’t have a yeast infection. I just wanted him to picture a vagina and hear the word suppositories. His blue eyes hadn’t flickered the way I thought. Maybe he wasn’t a porno flick actor. He probably had several leather armchairs at home and a golden retriever.

I walked past a clerk who was wearing turquoise lipstick. She had long brown hair, the way mine used to look. I smiled at her.

“I like your shaved head,” she said, catching me just before I turned my back to her.

“I like your turquoise lipstick,” I said, facing her as I walked backward.

She shrugged only one of her shoulders and ran her tongue over her bottom lip. Her red tongue picked up flecks of turquoise. I wanted her to stick the tip of her turquoise tongue out at me just to have that image—a Walgreens clerk with a blue tongue. She must’ve thought I was gay, even though I wasn’t. Maybe for her, but not regularly.

When I reached my car I realized I’d forgotten the Halls honey and lemon, but I couldn’t go back into the store now, so I pretended it was fine and drove to the library next.

I texted Frank as I parked and waited. He appeared out the back door of the two-story brick building in an ugly long sleeved shirt with a bleach stain at the hem.

“Hey,” he said, getting in the car with me. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” I said, lighting the joint, inhaling and passing it to him, obscuring his face with my smoke. “I just picked up my mom’s scrip at Walgreens.”

“Nice,” he said. “Cool hair.”
“My mom’s giving me shit about it.”
“Yeah, well you look gay,” he said apathetically, even though he had seen me naked, with purpose, multiple times. “Isn’t she Catholic?”
“I guess,” I replied. “In theory. She was raised Catholic.”
He took a second hit then returned the joint to my fingers.
“Just be glad you weren’t raised Catholic too,” he said. “That shit fucks with you.”
“Oh, but she raised me with the guilt,” I said, smirking.
“Fucking parents,” he said, smiling back.
“My dad’s having a fucking son with his wife.”
“Wow!” he said, itching the back of his neck. “Your dad kind of has a huge ego.”
“I know,” I said, exhaling and rolling my eyes back into my head. “Why else would he have a baby when he already has two grown up kids?”
“Whatever,” he said. We were silent for several minutes, finishing off the joint.
“I gotta go,” I said, before he could. “See you tomorrow.”
“Sure,” he said, in a voice that made me think he might ask me to hang out tonight. But he didn’t. “Bye.”
“Yeah,” I waved and turned the engine on. I watched him walk toward the library, his back turned to me, wondering if my shaved head had anything to do with him not asking me to come over tonight.

As I drove home, my mothers words clanged around in my head, “*Don’t you want to be pretty?*” and I didn’t feel bad that I hadn’t returned to the store for her Halls honey and lemon.

Mom woke me up in the middle of the night, her bathrobe on again. It had been three weeks since the “it’s a boy!” card came to our house. She’d put it on the fridge door, so every time she went to eat she’d lose her appetite.

“A new dieting technique,” she laughed.

She whispered my name, loudly. It was four in the morning. This happened sometimes, she’d wake up in the middle of the night, high on Ambien, and I’d put her back to bed. She wouldn’t remember it the next morning and I wouldn’t remind her, though somehow she knew she did it.

“Honey,” she said, near my ear. “Get up.”

“Mom, what are you doing? I was asleep.”

“I’m sorry. Are you awake now?”

“Yes!” I hissed. “Hello? You woke me up. What? What?”

“I’m not having a spell.”

“Okay?”

“I mean I haven’t taken any Ambien tonight.”

“Maybe you should, because then we’d both be asleep.”

“It’s a full moon, honey.”

“Great,” I said, rolling over.

“There’s something I’ve got to do and I need you to do it with me.”

“Can we wait until morning?”

“No, honey.”

“Well, is it quick? Huh?”

“Listen,” she said, sitting down on my bed. I felt her heat immediately.

“Do you have a fever, Mom?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I’m just alive.”

“What a thing to say at four in the morning.”

“I realized that today is the seventh anniversary of me having my hysterectomy.”

“What the hell?”

“And it’s a full moon. Just like when I had the surgery.”

“So? Okay?”

“I tried on my wedding dress. It still fits. But look, let’s make a fire in the backyard and burn it under the full moon. I know it’s crazy but come on. I just got the idea and we gotta do it.”

“For Christ’s sake! Are you insane? Start a fire in the backyard to burn your wedding dress? Mom!”

“It’s crazy, I know. But come on. It’ll be fun. Put your glasses on, so you can see.”

“I don’t want to see! What I’m hearing is insane enough!”

She laughed. I smiled. I put my hand up to her neck. She was warm. She laid her hand on my shaved head and ran her open palm along the tiny hairs growing back.

“You’re insane to have shaved your head,” she said. “Now, come on.”

I got out of bed, wrapped myself in my lavender bathrobe, with toothpaste stains on it, and followed her into her room. She pulled the wedding dress out of her closet. We stared at it for a while. It was truly atrocious, the shitty garish style anyone could expect of a marriage in the mid-eighties.

But she had looked beautiful.

A small crease of laughter escaped her mouth. I wondered what it felt like to be without a uterus. Is that why she cared so much about my shaved head?

We went out back and started a small fire in the rock pit that used to be a flowing fountain. Louis had installed it, this stupid fountain he wanted to put fish in. He never did and then they got divorced and Mom turned the water flow off.

The fire took longer to start than we thought. It was cold outside and I almost told her we should just not do this. But then a flame sprang up and Mom giggled. She was about to throw the dress in when I stopped her.

“Mom,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“I remember when you had your surgery. When you got rid of your uterus.”

She looked at me, the orange coils from the haphazard fire, lighting up her face, with all the wrinkles that explained her kindness, bad jokes, honesty and secrets.

“You know, Dad didn’t divorce you because he didn’t think you were a woman anymore, after that.”

“Okay,” she said, looking away, knowing that she had once believed that. How much that must have hurt, even after already being hurt, being locked out of her own body and wondering how to feel, if not completely riddled with doubt and solitary grief.

“There’s more than one way to be a woman, Mom,” I said.

She threw the dress in and the flames exploded, crackled with excitement, visceral desire, fueling deep turquoise blazed around the plastic beads, melting the shivering hem.

It really was an ugly dress, but it looked like a gorgeous tempest undoing itself, creating light from its own will to burn.