

Home from the Barber's

by Yoon Chung

The flash of confusion on his face is not off-putting. I had prepared myself for it. Smiling, I ask the barber for a haircut.

"I'm sorry, but this is a barbershop."

"Oh, I know."

"I only do men's hair."

You could hardly tell mine apart from a schoolboy's. I keep on smiling.

"That's what I want. A soft undercut?"

He waves me away.

"Go see a hairdresser."

I hadn't expected him to be this stubborn. Somehow, though, his tone doesn't hurt me. It can't. I'd spent one too many days gathering up the courage to step into his shop to turn back now. I make him look up from his scissors.

"I've tried hairdressers, but they don't really get what I want. I want the kind of haircut you give the other customers here. See?" I gesture at my cropped hair. "It's practically the same thing."

"Well . . ."

He hesitates. He hadn't expected me to be this stubborn, either.

"Well, I'll give it a try. But I'm warning you, I don't do women's hair."

The big guy with the tough crew cut isn't a prick. Just nervous. I'm not. His thick sausage-fingers are gentle as they comb through my hair. I'm more comfortable here than at any chatty salon, clippers buzzing across my scalp.

Money makes strangers kind. After all, I'm paying customer. Even though barbers are taken aback at my soft voice and pink eyeshadow, I get my way with a few dollars and a polite smile. This one does a fantastic job. I go home happy.

Mom isn't.

“Are you out of your mind? Those places aren’t for girls!”

“It was just the barber’s!”

“What’s wrong with the hair salon?”

“They suck at short hair!”

“Then grow it back!”

“No.”

A few dollars and a polite smile does not change a mother’s mind. After all, I’m a daughter, and daughters are supposed to look like pretty little copies of their mothers’ glory days. My cropped hair tickles a latent anxiety in her heart.

“Are you sure you’re a daughter? Because you sure don’t look like one.”

At first, she hid her disappointment well. But once I got into hair clippers, she couldn’t stop asking, when are you growing your hair back? She would show me actresses with chic bob cuts and gush over my old pictures, as if the new me wasn’t the real me and just someone else with whom I was having a summer fling. It’s okay, she seemed to say. It’s okay to have some fun—as long you dump her in the end.

I wasn’t dumping her.

Mom couldn’t understand her. Androgyny is supposed to be a gimmick. Hot K-Pop boys can wear makeup and lace onstage and people won’t bat an eye because it’s only a costume for raking in millions of dollars and getting the world to love our country. Once it becomes an identity for a flat-chested high school girl wearing glasses, all the fun is gone and suddenly the ambiguity is too serious to be likeable. Apples and oranges should be apples and oranges. Oranpples freak out the grocers. My brother used to touch up his shoulder-length hair in front of the mirror for half an hour before school every day. “He looks like a girl,” dad complained. “Could you stop looking at the mirror for once? I don’t know what a man’s got to do with all that spraying and ironing.”

I had it better. Pixie haircut? Suit yourself, hair grows back. Baggy pants and combat boots? Cool, they look good on you. Handsome boy, that son of yours—oh, it’s a girl? That’s okay, I get that a lot. And everyone laughs because it’s a funny story, useful as a joke to crack at a party. I wonder if my brother would have laughed?

Maybe not, considering what he said to me at one point: You won't get a boyfriend looking like that. Had he told himself something like it, too? It makes me wonder if he got his girlfriend after cutting his hair and going to the gym. I don't ask, and he doesn't say any more, but I can sense the rest unsaid—you should like men, and since men like women, you should be more like women. As if I wasn't one already. As if I didn't fall for all those girls and all those boys didn't fall for me. But then again, I would hate to comfort myself with the fact that I'd dumped a man who texted me for weeks and asked me out to the movies. If looking like a guy makes me less of a woman, should dating a guy even the score to make me whole? Like men, like women, like men, like women . . . the words start to lose meaning after a while, like saying your name over and over again until it becomes weirdly detached, sounding as unfamiliar as another language.

Back in my room, I strip off my pants and underwear. Bare from the waist down, I march into the living room. Mom and dad are watching TV. I make them watch me. I hold up my underwear, red with my blood.

I am your daughter.

I am your girl.

That was four years ago.

Now my mom's hair is almost as short as mine.

Not quite. But almost.



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