

Shorn — A Short Story

Ling Lee

As a hairdresser, you often think you've seen it all. I know from experience that after twenty years on the job, and having watched every trend come and go, it's easy to think that there's nothing more to life than bobs and side-cut fringes. But it's true that you come across an amazingly wide variety of interesting customers, and once in a while one of them changes your entire shampoo and blow-drying existence.

It was a sunny day and I was standing, chatting, snipping away as usual to the regular customers to whom I play counsellor — the 50-year-old housewife who insists on redoing highlights every two weeks as some sort of dogged denial of age, the young fashion design student asking for relationship advice. Normally I relished this role, but by the time closing time drew near, exhaustion had overtaken me. I could only give an inward sigh as I saw a girl outside pause, then decisively push the door open, before pasting on the well-worn smile.

Her hair was beautiful. A gorgeous, long, well-kept mane of wavy reddish-gold that flowed down her back. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, but the excess of mascara, the trendy clothes, all spoke of a yearning to be rid of childhood. I immediately felt a wave of annoyance wash over me as she strode straight past the counter and sat herself in the chair in front of me.

Another self-absorbed, vain teenager.

'I'd like to get my head shaved, please.' Her tone defied me to comment, tilted chin challenging.

Even worse. Another self-absorbed, vain teenager looking to make a statement that they would regret in a week's time.

'Of course.'

As I slowly snipped across the length of her beautiful, long hair before shaving, I couldn't help but vaguely wonder what drove this self-confident girl to this. Trying to annoy her parents, maybe. A new trend at school. The tired part of me that counted the minutes until closing time made me grateful for her silence. Lost in my thoughts, my motions slowed for a moment I noticed her angry gaze in the mirror.

'Keep cutting!'

A part of me ached to reprimand the girl, who could surely only be half my age, but the thought of getting the job done with silenced me. I fell to work again, slowly losing myself, when an annoyed snort came from the girl. I glanced up only to find her once again grimacing at the mirror, eyes narrowed. I paused.

'Did I ask you to stop?' she inquired icily. 'I want this over and done with, thanks.'

Exasperation filled me and I opened my mouth to let a sharp comment fly, unable to hold myself in any longer. Everything about this girl was unbearable, from her over made-up face to her haughty stare.

It was then that I suddenly noticed the slight wetness of her eyes, the trembling hands which betrayed her defiant chin. Suddenly the cold and arrogant attitude seemed less convincing and I once again wondered at her strange request. As the telltale drip of dark mascara leaked at the corners, the girl hastily looked down.

Unsure, I put down the scissors cautiously and placed a hand on her shoulder, preparing for an aggressive shrug-off. To my surprise however, she simply twisted away from me, never once glancing up, and began to speak.

And she explained. She explained the pain of watching someone who is more than a sister but a best friend, being slowly destroyed by a horrifyingly invisible force. She explained the feeling of seeing countless doctors in identically

bland white coats surround the bed until nothing can be seen anymore, the feeling of not knowing whether she will greet her tomorrow or if the bed will be empty, the feeling of time slipping away as the one person who knows her best wastes away amongst tubes and machines and squeaky sterilised corridors.

She revealed the raw horror of her beautiful sister's lost beauty, her frail body torn apart by the chemicals that should heal her, the first horrified cry that had escaped when the first strands of the red-blond hair that ran through the family had been found on her pillow. Finally, her gradually rising anger ceased and was replaced by a resigned note, painful to hear.

'I'm a bit vain, you know. In case you haven't noticed.' She paused and the corners of her mouth upturned wryly. 'Do you see? I have nothing to give. But if my sister can't have it ... It doesn't belong to me anymore.'

She finished with a fierce glance back to the mirror. For the first time, she stared straight into my reflection, and we stood for a moment, eyes meeting in the mirror. Without a sound, I finished shearing off the last of that reddish gold hair and she stood, slightly shaky.

She thanked me with the slightest of smiles and I couldn't help but be reminded of her size, a thin little shorn sheep. Long mane gone, make-up watered and wiped away, she looked frighteningly bare yet somehow a thousand times more beautiful than she had been when she first walked in. I would never see her again, and yet the sight of the proud girl with the uplifted chin and her greatest beauty gone would remain with me for years to come.

The girl's hair was beautiful. Even scattered on the tiled floor in a mass of glinting red and gold, I could see the healthiness that had once shone through, surely the investment of countless salon treatments, careful brushing and expensive shampoos. Yet somehow, lying forlornly on the ground, each lock was so much more precious because of the love that had caused it to be severed from its owner.

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Ling Lee wrote this in 2010 when she was in Year 12 at James Ruse Agricultural High School in New South Wales.