

## Thinning Hair

by Jennifer N. Shannon

Last night everything changed between us. We laid in the bed, backs facing one another, thinking through the gravity of what was said hours before, the statement laying between us, wedging our bodies into different directions. “I have a son,” rang in my mind over and over again. The sentence was very curt, like a knife quickly piercing my leg, but it continued to grow longer. Into a story of sorts. “I have a son and his name is Ryan.” More detail being added after each pause. “I have a son and his name is Ryan. He’s 22 now.” It just kept building and building like a drama or some corny 2-hour special that keeps you watching until the climax but this time I was co-starring and my wife was the main character.

She kept going, “I gave him up when I was 16. My parents made me. I don’t even remember seeing him after I gave birth. I was scared and young and that’s what was best. At the time, it was my only choice.”

I just stared straight ahead into the darkness. It was very unnatural, her sharing more and more: fears, desires, failures. Things I had never heard her say in our five years of marriage or six months of dating. I think it was the sharing that made me want to sprint through the house and bolt out the door. It was her overwhelming desire to release everything she felt. All the things she’d been holding in. I was confounded. Pissed that she didn’t trust me enough to be truthful in the beginning. But not just about this, about everything. In all the years of our “honest” conversations, she had never told me any of these things.

Like how she wanted to travel the world with a backpack and just enough of everything she needed which only included the clothes on her back and a few dollars to get her started. Or that she felt that one day she’d retreat to a monastery until she had sorted through all of her issues, which according to her was an exhaustive list. Or that she had started writing a memoir about the experience of giving up her son.

I was caught between reconciling the fact that I once thought she was perfect while realizing that we had been living a lie. We’d decided against children but she said she oftentimes longed for the cry of a little person in his/her own room down the hall from ours. My mind begged for no more information. No more confessions. No more truth. It had had enough. We stayed in silence until I got out of bed. “Where you going,” she asked. Her voice was terrified.

I couldn’t answer, just walked to the bathroom and sat on the toilet banging my head against the insides of two weak hands. Once the sensation to knock myself into another less complicated day wore off, one hand settled on the top of my head. It was at that moment when I knew this would inevitably remove the rest of my hair. I finally stood up, still fingering my thinning locks, looking in the mirror at youth fading. My dad seemed to embrace his white, prickly look but I didn’t think I’d ever be comfortable asking the barber to take the sides down low and leave what was on the top there as if it would blend perfectly. As my image reflected back I finally saw myself. I was predictable. Safe. A man who was uncomfortable with his thinning hair. That’s

how she saw me. No she hadn't said it but her actions showed me. I wouldn't leave her. This confession was just one in what would be a long sequence of others. Next it would be "I've been having an affair" which I knew about but was too ashamed to admit. I remember when I first suspected it. She got home really late one night and I asked her where she'd been. She stuttered, avoided my eyes, became defensive, all in 30 seconds or less. I let her off the hook, "babe you must have had a rough day. Let me fix you a plate, I made your favorite." Honestly she looked more refreshed that day than she had in years. She smiled when she thought I wasn't looking. Noticeably remembering moments of passion, her mouth opening just slightly, a hint of a smirk filling her eyes. I wondered if she ever thought about me that way. If she was ever totally distracted and consumed by the thought of our time together, like I had been about her since the day we met.

I heard her call my name, "Jerry—You alright?"

I didn't answer, just walked out of the bathroom into our room and crawled into bed. I didn't know what to do with the overload of information. I couldn't move and all of a sudden my mind could go no further than remembering how I looked standing in the mirror, peering into a face that was aging. And not even aging gracefully. I was 40 and my hair made me look ten years older.

"Jerry," she quietly said again. "I'm sorry. I know this is a lot to take in. I just couldn't ta—"

"Ssh."

"Huh?"

"Stop talking. Please."

"But we need to finish this."

"Carolyn, please just shut up for a while. One more word and all of my hair is gonna fall out."

She reluctantly closed her mouth and turned her body in the opposite direction, confused by my statement. I was equally as shocked but it was the only thing that made sense. It was the only real truth I had. Here she had been confessing all of her truths, even living them in some ways, and I, in the meantime, only had this one. That I was growing old—alone.

I tried to go to sleep. Tried to recall the moments before I went into that bathroom. Before I was faced with the only truth that mattered to me. I couldn't. Time stood still while I was in there. It froze just long enough for me to see that we were not the same. That I would never be the same.

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The next few months were hazy. My emotions paralyzed me and held me in a place of quiet, thoughtful captivity. It was the most sobering, therapeutic time of my life. Carolyn finally

admitted she had had an affair. That was the night I finally left. I can't say that I felt better after I walked out but at least I could breathe. At least I had stopped pretending.

Now staring in the mirror has new meaning. When I look at myself I smile. I give myself a good hard look and actually smile. I smile because there was a time when looking into the mirror signified growing old—alone. And frankly that scared me. But these days this hair of mine, or lack thereof, is a symbol of wisdom. Of life happening. And although it started thinning earlier than I wanted, who knew how appealing being bald would look.

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