

ANNABEL JANKOVIC

Haircut

1

I drive up for several days in late October, the time of year my hometown starts to fray, to steel itself. Low white sun, filling the outsized absence of small, migratory birds. Power outages and the concomitant pall of woodsmoke. Still horses in coarse fields.

I sit at the foot of my childhood bed, against the wall where a simple embroidery once presided, pronounced *good friends will follow you to the ends of the earth*. A sleepless habit: I set my hands to work on my hair, frayed beyond legibility over years of global illness. Hand after restless hand through the knots, to the ends, splitting them.

When I decide heedlessly and all at once to have my hair cut, grasping across telephone wires, all the salons are full but one.

Between transactional questions and answers, this last voice accumulates matter and charge, ossifying, unmistakable.

An impossibility: a pale figure from the bright hall of high school royalty. I stumble. A tall, taut girl; artillery-like, enviously thin. Thinness or its inverse having stratified us all. Puritanically clear skin, foil to my outcrops and trenches. A girl who met the world with impenetrable severity, exposed thighs, band shirts — cut with kitchen scissors to disclose the right angle of a cold shoulder — who almost certainly entered the sphere of psychoactives and condoms before our junior year.

When I give her my name for the reservation, she responds opaquely, a mercy I'm grateful for.

2

I park several blocks away to comb through the last of the tangles, broken pieces pooling in my lap. A woman my mother's age passes on the street, puffing in a downy coat. She stops to tell me *what beautiful hair you have*, sowing regret before reentering the headwind.

The salon is warm, yellow, self-contained, elaborating the blue edge of the street. Botanicals and chemicals make a climate. Outside, gradient cloudbanks separate several miles above ground; crows grow a more formidable opponent.

I recognize her instantly; she gives no indication we aren't strangers. I'm led to a chair in the corner. As always, it's uncomfortable to behold myself in the mirror in the company of another person and I avert my eyes athletically. She fastens the apron tightly and I pull at the neck when she's turned away.

She approaches mechanically and accepts perhaps all too readily the incomplete vision I describe. I worry this won't yield what I hope it will. She picks up her shears and touches me for the first time.

Because it's unacceptable not to speak, we transmit simple messages over the din of hair dryers and neighboring conversations, far more intimate. Because I am supposed to be meeting her for the first time, I ask in increments toward her latest iteration. We paint the rerouting of our lives in recent years, the fine then wholesale adjustments of expectations. I learn she's moved between as many jobs as I have states. Through all of this I pretend we haven't been Facebook friends for over a decade, that I haven't watched from afar as the ravenlike boy she tells me about became her fiance.

Eventually and inevitably I feign surprise at our having been in the same high school class, and she softens measurably when I tell her how claustrophobic and small my early teenage years had been, how lucky I'd felt to leave for a big city halfway through — a pattern, I don't tell her, I am yet to sever.

If we talk about our classmates, it's only in terms of a shapeless body of people that we feel, in their ways, misunderstood and mistreated us. That we inevitably also misunderstood and mistreated. We don't say names, though I think of them: stock announcements of their degrees and accolades. Their unlikely pairings and engagements, high-altitude weddings and look-alike newborns. Less, their premature deaths.

For one, the would-be actor — eternally 19 and uncomplicated — who died seven days into the new year in a snowstorm on I-90, driving back to the university he and my brother both attended.

His tight curls and frenetic eyes weigh heavily in our sixth-grade homeroom photo.

When I learned he died, I thought of the summer I went home after the longest time I'd spent away; of the fine, warm afternoon I saw him at the skatepark: a long, supple body looking over the edge of the pool, into something only he could see.

I find myself on his Facebook from time to time — no matter, it seems, how briefly, thinly our lives crossed — wading through the same few headshots his family gave the funeral home: a young man with optimistic cheekbones, as if buttressed by his spirit's oyster theory of the world.

And I think of how his parents — whose online lives don't feel to betray the depth and breadth of their inner ruin — must brace themselves each time they imagine the determination, the velocity of a GMC Sierra pickup meeting the meager roof of an overturned car.

Did our teacher know she was standing among future ghosts? That, statistically speaking, not all of us could survive our world's blind corners?

My brother took the same route back to campus that day, but left several hours later, and lived.

His father writes: "My Guy, I miss and love you. Four years ago today. The most horrific night of our lives. Dad."

3

We talk a little bit about Seattle, the city that held for us, as teenagers, the infinite promise of anonymity and escape, flickering

green across the insurmountable buffer of Puget Sound. I think of the many times I rode the ferry back to our little island, acne-filled and without autonomy, dark wind carrying away my hope as city lights gave way to the most intolerable kind of stillness.

I try to picture the girls who were cruel to her — I know they were — their names and appetites, side-swept bangs, and paranoid, fluctuating alliances. Their fathers' Porsches and marriage-fracturing affairs. Their mothers' penchant for illusively high ceilings and the carbon-copy floor plans so crusaded against by the keepers of tradition. Their SAT scores, high speeds, abortions. Their long-armed brothers: browned, heroic, grass-stained, varsity, freer than we could ever dream of being. Their quiet childhood streets and receding driveways leading, finally, to waterfronts, seclusion, silence. To lives impossible to see with the naked eye. To girls.

The salon thins with the hour and our talk peters out, the tapered retreat of an ordinary rain. I steal furtive glances in the mirror while she works, wondering if she, too, upon hearing of our classmate's death, felt newly organic, animal. For the first time like a body and not a mind.

When she finishes she pulls the apron from my shoulders and runs a hand through my hair. I don't look good but don't blame her; I know short hair doesn't suit me, but always end up trying again. I pay her and she gives me her card and we agree that at some indeterminate point in the future we should try to see each other again. I'm gathering my things, odds and ends all too resistant, when she doesn't so much ask as concede, *didn't you always have long hair in high school?*