

© Teresa R. Funke
www.teresafunke.com
First Published In: *The Tampa Review* 2002
“Notable Essay” *Best American Essays Series 2003*

Liberated Hair

By Teresa Funke

It lies in my hands coiled and still. It's more than a foot long—sixteen inches to be exact. Adam, the stylist, combed it out gently and tied it with a thick rubber band before cutting it off and handing it to me. I hesitated before I took it.

It's soft and dark brown, thicker toward the top than at the bottom, and surprisingly heavy. This is my hair, the characteristic that has defined me for as long as I can remember.

Now what do I do with it?

I was thinking the other day about the hair wreaths popular in the last half of the nineteenth century. I have seen them displayed in museums and historic homes around my town in Northern Colorado. I'm told women would trim the tresses of loved ones, living or dead, or carefully remove hair from their own brushes each night to store in decorative containers topped with lids. To weave those strands into tight tiny braids must have strained every muscle in their hands. To shape those braids into elaborate wreaths, accented with ribbons, dried flowers, seashells, must have required a patience unknown

to my generation. To display those loving creations in shadow boxes—believing they would last forever, that children and grandchildren would retain a piece of them long after they were gone—must have provided such a sense of peace and purpose.

I'm sure those respectable Victorian matrons never imagined that one day strangers would peer through the glass and wrinkle their noses in disgust. Trends come and go. Hair wreaths are definitely out.

Still, it seems I should do *something* fantastic with my severed hair. Sell it for a wig, perhaps, or present it in a locket to my husband, the man who has begged me for years not to cut it. A friend suggested a hair pillow. *That* I would give to my mother, the person who raised me to believe my hair made me special, like Samson. Cut it and be powerless or, worse yet, ordinary.

I pull up to the salon on the day of my appointment, arriving early, unusual for me, but I am determined to browse through the fashion books before they call my name. I'm still not sure who I should become. That's what this feels like. Not a haircut, but a metamorphosis, and I'm concerned I haven't spent enough time contemplating a new identity.

I pause for a moment in the car before entering the salon, tipping the rearview mirror down for a last look at the long braid draped over my right shoulder. I grip it in one hand, firmly but gently, the way I hold my children's hands when we cross the street, and recall a recent comparison between myself and my beloved grandmother who wore her hair exactly this way back in 1917. My mother, in her twenties, dazzled others with her long hair before cutting it finally to seal the milestone of her thirtieth birthday. I'd

meant to do that myself, but I'd blown that goal when I celebrated my thirty-first birthday three weeks ago. I wonder if it has been this, then, that has kept me from cutting my hair all my life—some bizarre family tradition, some vision of self gleaned from the beautiful women who came before me, an attempt to stay connected to the most influential figures of my early life.

And then, for a second, I wonder what my hair is thinking. Does it feel I'm abandoning it? I know it's crazy, but I can't help feeling sorry for it. It has no idea what's coming. Frankly, neither do I.

In the waiting area, I claim a middle seat against the wall. I'm trying to be nonchalant, discreet. I'm trying to look like I belong here, though my heart is racing and I keep stealing glances around the room. It's not like I've never been in a salon before. I have occasionally accompanied my mother and my husband to their appointments and I've been taking my children for haircuts for a couple of years now. I know the basic routine, establish a plan, don the cape, wash the hair, cut. I know the smells: shampoo, gel, hairspray, fingernail polish from the manicurist in the back corner. I know the sounds: blow dryers, scissors, high-dry laughs, the receptionist scheduling cuts. It's just that I've never known them *personally* before. I've watched stylists finish up on others then turn hungry eyes toward my long hair and say, "How about you? Can I give you a haircut?" And it has always felt strangely empowering to turn them down, to walk smugly away with my virgin hair intact.

Today, though, these sights, these sounds, these scissors are for me. And as I flip hurriedly through fashion books, glancing at the grinning models and their puffed-up hair, I can't help thinking about another picture that has been coming to mind lately.

I am two years old and wearing a frilly two-piece swimsuit from which my round ample belly juts forth. My smile is not just on my full baby lips, but in the way my cheeks bubble up toward my shining eyes. I am in the moment, totally, completely, and my hair is short. Very short. My mother called it a pixie cut, and that's how I look, like a playful fairy, an intuitive soul, someone on the verge of laughter or tears, someone magical. It's not that I know my place in the world—I *am* the world.

That was the only time my hair has ever been short. For as long as I can remember, it has cascaded over my shoulders to a length just below my waist. It has been my identifying feature, my trademark. "Oh, you mean the girl with the long hair? Yes, I remember her."

How will they remember me now?

"I might be a bit emotional," I warn Adam as I slide into the high, vinyl chair, crossing everything that will cross—my legs, my arms, my fingers. "So you can't laugh. You have to promise not to laugh."

Adam, to whom I've been referred by a close friend, raises a comb in one hand, sharp scissors in the other, and mouths a solemn oath as he turns his attention toward my hair. I study his features in the mirror. He's handsome in a clean-cut way with dark sad eyes and gentle hands. He concentrates on his work, making casual chitchat, and I realize he's not quite what I'd hoped for today. I'd imagined someone more flamboyant

that would tease me and make me laugh—taking my mind off my fears. Or someone who would engage me in constant conversation to drown out the sound of the scissors.

Kshsht, kshsht. The hair falls.

I am strangely calm. There is something so reassuring about Adam's practiced movements, soft steady voice and unassuming manner. Slowly my legs and arms begin to unwind and I start to breathe again. I know now I will not cry though I came close last night. I was brushing my hair before bed when I realized that was the last time the roots would tingle as so much hair burst free from the rubber band, the last time I'd bring the brush down in one long, fluid stroke, the last time I'd glimpse in the mirror my hair swishing behind me as I turned to go.

In a lighter mood, I might have wrapped my hair twice around my neck like a scarf or played out a melodrama by bunching it atop my head to form the heroine's bow, then draping it across my lip to represent the long, handlebar mustache of the villain. That was a favorite act among the slumber party set of my youth. For as long as I can remember I did those things because they made people laugh. Because no one else could do them.

I wonder if I'll miss the little habits I never realized were ingrained in me. How will it feel to go to bed at night and not sweep my hair up over the pillow? How long until my hands forget the nimble subtleties of weaving long braids down my back? Will I ever break the habit of checking to be sure my hair hasn't caught in the car door?

"This'll be fun," Adam says.

It's all I can do not to groan. He cannot know the agony I've been through these past few days. The fight or flight battle raging within me, the knots in my stomach, the

increased heartbeat, the strain on my lungs. He cannot know how this moment has consumed my thoughts, making it hard to focus on work or my children. How, for once, I have kept a secret from my husband, the man to whom I tell everything, out of fear he'd talk me out of it again.

I won't tell Adam that this morning I woke as if it was the first day of school, a judgment day. How I could *feel* my hair as if it was not quite a part of me, feel its weight against my neck, its slight flutterings as it brushed my back. How the sunlight from the kitchen window heated every strand.

To be excited and terrified over a haircut, who could possibly understand that? Maybe my four-year-old son. He hates haircuts.

"I'm getting my hair cut today," I tell him.

His mouth drops open, his eyes grow large. "You are. *Why?*"

I shrug. "You got your haircut, so did Lydia, and Daddy. I just thought it was my turn."

This is the kind of logic a four-year old can understand. He nods, satisfied, but he touches my head and looks concerned.

"Are they going to use the thing that sounds like an airplane?"

"No way." I laugh. "No one's coming near this head with a shaver."

"Oh, good," he says, and he's off to something else.

But I haven't moved on so easily. I'm thinking about the nightmare I had in which I tell Adam exactly what I want and close my eyes as he begins to cut. But something doesn't feel right. I open my eyes to find him sitting across from me with his

feet up on the counter. In the mirror's reflection a strange woman yanks and twists at my hair.

“Do you know what I want?” I ask her, alarmed.

“No, I’m just doing a new style I think will look good on you.”

This, of course, is exactly the problem. I’ve never been one to follow trends. My long hair outlasted the feathered look of the Seventies, the big hair of the Eighties, the layered cuts of the early Nineties. And while my friends struggled to tame their manes into the latest fashions, I sailed through the decades with the “timeless” hairstyle. Always easy, mostly free of gels and sprays, always envied. Now I’m here in a salon giving my permission to a stylist to “make me look like the woman in this picture.”

“You’re going to have to show me how to style and arrange this,” I confess to Adam. “I really haven’t the faintest idea how to fix hair of this length.”

For days now I’ve been worrying about the silliest things. Do you wash your hair before a cut? Can you wear earrings or do they just get in the way? By the way, that is what you call them these days, isn’t it? *Stylists?* How much does a haircut cost and do you have to tip? What if I sneeze while he’s cutting? What if I have to go to the bathroom? Oh, God, will I have to use a curling iron? I’m terrified of those.

I’m making too big a deal out of this, of course, but it serves to remind me what I’ve avoided all these years. Never the hassle of scheduling appointments, rounding up babysitters, fretting over bad hairdos. What a godsend it had been in those paycheck-to-paycheck college years never having to budget for haircuts. I estimate I’ve saved thousands of dollars as I’ve breezed past, not only hair salons, but store aisles lined with

crimpers, hot rollers, shaped brushes, hair dryer attachments. I've been smug. Long hair has made my life easier. Why mess with that now?

"Skinny women just don't have boobs that big," a woman's voice says. "No, they don't," two other women emphatically agree. Despite myself I'm listening to them.

"This is a beauty parlor," Adam whispers, sounding a bit embarrassed. "You hear all kinds of things in here."

But I'm grateful for the distraction. Besides I've always been left to merely speculate about hair salons (the ones in which no children are present), as if they were secret clubs to which I'd been denied membership all these years. Did women really open up to their stylists? Did they really tell them about their husband's affairs, their boss's illegal dealings, their own selfish failings? I'm fascinated, now, by this girl who is too skinny for her boobs, but the women stop talking, and the silence forces me back to myself.

I'm remembering all the hands that have arranged my hair. The firm, confident holds of my grandmother; the hurried shapings of my mother; the clumsy fingerings of young girls; the tender strokes of my husband; the playful tugs of my babies; the tentative touches of strangers who then sheepishly apologize, "I'm sorry, I just *had* to touch your hair."

"Don't be afraid to touch it," Adam tells me as he begins styling. "You've seen women run their fingers through their hair? Do that if you feel like it. You won't mess it up."

I brighten for a moment. This is a new concept for me. My hair has always been tied up away from my face with rubber bands, barrettes, headbands, at the very least

tucked deliberately behind my ears. Wearing a bun meant mastering a statuesque pose to keep the weight of my hair from pulling loose.

But this, too, was part of the way I saw myself. I was the girl who never hid behind her hair, never twirled it around her finger when nervous or checked it in the mirror when self-conscious. I was the one without bangs falling into her eyes, a transparent shield from which to view the world. I could put my best face forward knowing, in this case, the frame would draw more attention than the picture itself.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to do such a drastic change on someone,” Adam is saying.

Drastic change. Of course, that must be what he *hopes* for on any given day lest his job turn tedious, but maybe it's what I've been avoiding?

I'm one of those people who reminds others that change is good. I'll try new things, move to new places, travel, but maybe I'm not as secure as I think. A friend asked if there was some deep-seated psychological reason why I never cut my hair. I think about it and I can almost convince myself that this is the reason why:

It started when we were nine or ten. That's when the girls in my class noticed styles, became conscious of their appearance. That's when my friends started lopping off their locks, but it's also when my parents started trimming their ties to each other. It was an amicable divorce, and I didn't suffer—much. Was holding onto my hairstyle my way of maintaining continuity in an overturned life? After all, I could control my hair, but not the changes that were taking place within my body, or the upheavals in my family.

Shortly after my parents separated, my mother uprooted me from my private school and dropped me into a public junior high teaming with kids, the kind who taped

Catholic schoolgirls to telephone poles and spit on them—or so I'd heard. I was so angry with my mother, so shy and so scared. The night before the first day of school I slept in curlers. My long hair wouldn't quite curl, but it gave me a marvelous wave, so attractive, so grown up. The kids in my new school noticed, and so did the teachers. My hair was the part of me that reached out to people, drew them in.

It remained that way in high school. I was called quiet, studious, nice, and I was well liked—by the teachers, anyway. I didn't dress cool, and I scorned adolescent mind games and contests for popularity. I was not quite a nerd; I was just vastly overlooked. Except for my hair. Every now and then one of the popular kids, boys and girls, would sidle up to me in the hallway and whisper; "I love your hair." Then they'd move on before anyone noticed them talking to me.

In college, my hair attracted young men. It even brought my husband and me together. We met in a survey class. When he entered from the back of the room he could see only my hair, but that was enough. He sat down next to me and struck up a conversation. The first, and only other time, a stylist has ever touched my hair was for our wedding. She came to the church to weave a thin, simple braid across the crown of my head to which we could affix the veil. I'd slept in braids the night before and my hair was just as Roger loved it, just as I loved it, wavy and full and very, very long.

"I think you're going to find that people will comment more about your hair now," Adam offers as he fluffs it with a blow dryer. "You might even have people come up just to tell you they like the style."

I laugh, and he stops the dryer for a moment to look at me quizzically. He can't know that it is the opposite I have been fearing.

"You're going to find it moves more now," he continues. "Play with it. Let it be free."

I nod, placing meaning to his words that he never intended. After all, bottom-line, that's why I'm here. To be playful, to be free. This haircut is my grand adventure in a time when kids, finances, and time constraints prevent me from taking exotic vacations, striking up new friendships, picking up new hobbies. Just thinking about cutting my hair has taken me to a new place, heightened my senses, made me acutely aware of colors, smells, the touch of the breeze and my husband's hands, the off-key singing of my children.

I wanted to discover something new about myself so I wondered if my hair would bounce if it were shorter. Could a stylist tell me exactly what color it is, could he tell me if it is thick or thin? Would my head feel lighter? Could I learn to like myself with shorter hair?

"It's medium to thick, but you've got a lot of hair," Adam answers.

And I'm truly surprised. I'd always assumed my hair was thin because it hung so straight.

"It's a very pretty color," he continues. "Definitely a dark brown to a natural black. No, it's more like . . . coffee. No wait, with these red highlights, you could almost call it—mahogany!"

Mahogany. I love that. And, now that he's done, I like the way my hair floats about my face, the way it takes flight when I shake my head. I laugh at how it parts haphazardly to the side and the way it seems to lift my face. This is fun for a day, I tell

myself, part of me convinced I will wake up tomorrow with my long hair back. My poor husband, I remember. This is going to kill him.

"Just remember," Adam had told me at the start of the cut. "Hair grows back."

That had been my reassurance. It's what gave me the courage to go through with it. All along I'd been afraid I'd cut my hair and decide *not* to grow it back. Now, something has changed, and I'm beginning to fear I *will*.

I toss my new hair and tell myself no matter which I choose, something about me will remain changed. I've realized you can't go back, but neither can you stop the clock, and that's okay. I'd forgotten that identity should be complex and ever changing, that in order to see a grand new view, we sometimes have to knock down a supporting wall. Brave words, but in this moment I feel them strongly and I am proud of myself.

I stand, and around my feet swirl wisps of hair. I cradle my rope of cut hair in my hands and decide to put it in my cedar chest among the favorite dresses I never had the heart to throw out and my children's baptism outfits and the craft project I made in seventh grade.

I carry my hair in front of me, but when my hand hits the door handle, my confidence wanes. I search for Adam, but he's gone to get the broom. People pass by the salon without a glance in my direction. They do not see me. My stomach churns. Out of habit, I sweep my long hair back behind my shoulders but it springs toward my face.

"Don't worry, Teresa," I can hear him say again. "Your hair is not your only good feature."

I take a deep breath and lower my liberated locks to my side knowing this time they cannot lead me, that I must see this adventure through on my own.

In the coming days I will have second thoughts when I'm met with the sheer horror on my husband's face, but I'll find reassurance in the instant excitement of friends who totally approve the change. My son will tell me I look like Grandma, and I won't be sure how to take that. My two-year-old daughter will tell me I look beautiful. But for me, the moment of truth will arrive days later when, waking in the middle of the night, I'll stumble half-asleep into the golden glow of the bathroom nightlight and be met by some foreign girl with a dizzying mess of sleep-tousled hair falling close to her face. It'll take a moment to register that this is me. It's me!

What a gift not to recognize oneself.