

THE HAIRCUT

I knew the moment he got on the plane that something wasn't right, but what it was eluded me. He stood there in his khaki suit, tennis racket in hand, his teenage boys beaming on either side. I stood, our daughter in my arms, flanked by my parents. We faced one another the way I'd seen the British and French do in old Revolutionary War films.

What is wrong with this picture? I asked myself, recalling a test I'd often failed as a child. I was gullible, good at believing. (The dog belonged eating at the table; the wife could wear her husband's

hat.) I knew everyone was expecting me to greet this man from whom I'd been estranged, for this was our time of reconciliation, the time to make up for what had been. We had reached this decision together after living apart and on opposite coasts for a year.

We had been estranged since before the child was born. He couldn't handle the additional responsibility; I clung more than I should. I had wanted a family; he still struggled to get beyond the one he already had. We had tried to separate and failed. I took a job in California, where I moved with my small child. He stayed on the East Coast. But we spoke every day on the phone. Each of us made several trips back and forth. I agreed to leave my West Coast job. He said he would try again.

Two months had passed since we had seen each other. I still felt annoyed with him for breaking our Valentine's plans (a ski trip he'd promised the boys came up). I had gotten miffed over his not calling when he said he would. I hurt over disappointments, large and small, but now I had come with our daughter to my parents' house in Florida, and he had come with the boys. It was to be a family vacation, our time to reconcile.

Look again, I told myself, still unable to decide what bothered me, what seemed wrong. His face looked handsome, almost tanned. His suit was neat and pressed. His eyes were clear and bright, his shoes polished. His beard and hair were neat and trimmed.

I paused there. For if you spend five years of your life with someone, you pay attention to certain things. This is a man of quirks, little oddities you don't forget. He won't eat oatmeal if it has any lumps. He won't wear a watch. When hurt, he recoils. He must play tennis every day. He has a way he hunches when he's telling an untruth. And he won't walk into a barbershop. In fact he prides himself in not having been in a barbershop in

twenty-five years. I had cut his hair for the past five, his ex-wife had done the same for innumerable years before that. This man was a willing Samson to his Delilahs. Two months had passed since I'd seen him, yet his hair was neat and trim.

It felt as if the meaning of a dream were suddenly revealed, as if a foreign code had been cracked. The broken Valentine's weekend, the missed phone calls, the colleague he always needed to see. Suddenly in one lucid moment, standing there in the airport, my family by my side, his next to him, all of us happy to be in a place where it was sunny and warm, the pieces of the puzzle fit together as I had been trying to get them to for so long.

It was a crystallizing, a coming together, an epiphany, if you will, as if a fog had lifted. I had no more doubt. Nothing was unsure. As he stepped forward to embrace me, I said, "Who cut your hair?" He stepped back, but I held my ground. "Tell me," I said, moving our child to my shoulder, "Who cut your hair?"

Kenneth Bernard

VINES

Lately I notice that I *smell* more. I used to be able to wear the same shirt three or four days without being aware of it. Now, even in the course of a day, it smells foul. I smell foul. It doesn't seem to matter whether or not I take cosmetic precaution. My *deodorants* smell foul by the end of the day. Along with this my feet are getting colder and sweating differently. My blood is circulating less. I think about my teeth a lot. Not too long ago I used to begin days feeling on top of things. Lately I realize I'm full of little stratagems to hold it all together. I wiggle a toe here,

"They're probably only open on weekends," he said. "A little brown like that. Powdered milk's okay."

"You don't like it at home. You told me you don't like powdered milk."

"I didn't say that," he replied. "Do you want me to go for the cattail root?"

"It's margarine," she said. "We have margarine, not butter."

"I'll fry them up."

"They're probably protected, like trillium."

"You can pick cattails," he said. "Nobody cares about cattails."

He went to the pile of fire logs and began splitting them, crouching, the hatchet working in clean, economical strokes. She watched him. He was good at splitting wood. The arc of arm and shoulder swung smoothly to aim each blow. "The summer's almost over," she said, taking one berry into her mouth. She mashed it with her tongue, chewed and swallowed. The sun passed its zenith and she saw a stripe of shadow appear on the grass beside her husband, a silhouette slim as a boy, tender as memory. She began to eat the berries in twos and threes, picking them out with her fingers, forgoing a spoon. "It's almost September." He turned to look at her. "No, it's not," he said. "It isn't, and it's scarcely noon. We have lots of time."

Julio Cortázar

A CONTINUITY OF PARKS

He had begun to read the novel a few days before. He had put it down because of some urgent business conferences, opened it again on his way back to the estate by train, he permitted himself a slowly growing interest in the plot, in the characterizations. That afternoon, after writing a letter giving his power of attorney and discussing a matter of joint ownership with the manager of his estate, he returned to the book in the tranquillity of his study which looked out upon the park with its oaks. Sprawled in his favorite armchair, its back toward the door—even

the possibility of an intrusion would have irritated him, had he thought of it—he let his left hand caress repeatedly the green velvet upholstery and set to reading the final chapters. He remembered effortlessly the names and his mental image of the characters, the novel spread its glamour over him almost at once. He tasted the almost perverse pleasure of disengaging himself line by line from the things around him, and at the same time feeling his head rest comfortably on the green velvet of the chair with its high back, sensing that the cigarettes rested within reach of his hand, that beyond the great windows the air of afternoon danced under the oak trees in the park. Word by word, caught up in the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting himself be absorbed to the point where the images settled down and took on color and movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin. The woman arrived first, apprehensive, now the lover came in, his face cut by the backlash of a branch. Admirably, she stanchd the blood with her kisses, but he rebuffed her caresses, he had not come to perform again the ceremonies of a secret passion, protected by a world of dry leaves and furtive paths through the forest. The dagger warmed itself against his chest, and underneath liberty pounded, hidden close. A lustful, panting dialogue raced down the pages like a rivulet of snakes, and one felt it had all been decided from eternity. Even to those caresses which writhed about the lover's body, as though wishing to keep him there, to dissuade him from it; they sketched abominably the frame of that other body it was necessary to destroy. Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazards, possible mistakes. From this hour on, each instant had its use minutely assigned. The cold-blooded, twice-gone-over reexamination of the details was barely broken off so that a hand could caress a cheek. It was beginning to get dark.

Not looking at one another now, rigidly fixed upon the task

which awaited them, they separated at the cabin door. She was to follow the trail that led north. On the path leading in the opposite direction, he turned for a moment to watch her running, her hair loosened and flying. He ran in turn, crouching among the trees and hedges until, in the yellowish fog of dusk, he could distinguish the avenue of trees which led up to the house. The dogs were not supposed to bark, they did not bark. The estate manager would not be there at this hour, and he was not there. He went up the three porch steps and entered. The woman's words reached him over the thudding of blood in his ears: first a blue chamber, then a hall, then a carpeted stairway. At the top, two doors. No one in the first room, no one in the second. The door of the salon, and then, the knife in hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel.

Translated by Paul Blackburn