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The Weave

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CHARLES JOHNSON

The Weave

News item, July 12, 2012. Hair theft: Three thieves battered through a wall, crawled close to the floor to dodge motion detectors, and stole six duffel bags filled with human hair extensions from a Chicago beauty-supply store. The Chicago Tribune reported Saturday that the hair extensions were worth \$230,000.

“So what feeds this hair machine?”

—Chris Rock, Good Hair

Ieesha is nervous and trying not to sneeze when she steps at four in the morning to the front door of Sassy Hair Salon and Beauty Supplies in the Central District. After all, it was a sneeze that got her fired from this salon two days ago. She has a sore throat and red eyes, but that’s all you can see because a ski mask covers the rest of her face. As she twists the key in the lock, her eyes are darting in every direction, up and down the empty street, because she and I have never done anything like this before. When she worked here, the owner, Frances, gave her a key so she could open and straighten up the shop before the other hairstylists arrived. I told her to make a copy of the key in case one day she might need it. That was two days ago, on September first, the start of hay fever season and the second anniversary of the day we started dating.

Once inside the door, she has exactly forty seconds to remember and punch in the four-digit code before the alarm’s security system goes off. Then, to stay clear of the motion detectors inside that never turn off, she gets down on the floor of the waiting room in her cut-knee jeans and crawls on all fours past the leather reception chairs and modules stacked with *Spin*, *Upscale*, and *Jet* magazines for the salon’s customers to read and just perhaps find on their glossy, Photoshopped pages the coiffure that is perfect for their mood at the moment. Within a few seconds, Ieesha is beyond the reception area and into a space, long and wide, that is a site for unexpected mystery and wonder that will test the limits of what we think we know.

Moving deeper into this room, where the elusive experience called beauty is manufactured every day from hot combs and crème relaxers,

she passes workstations, four on each side of her, all of them equipped with swiveling styling chairs and carts covered with appliance holders, spray bottles, and Sulfur8 shampoo. Holding a tiny flashlight attached to her key ring, she works her way around manicure tables, dryer chairs, and a display case where sexy, silky, eiderdown-soft wigs, some as thick as a show pony's tail, hang in rows like scalps taken as trophies after a war. Every day, the customers at Sassy Hair Salon and the wigs lovingly check each other out for some time, and then after long and careful deliberation, the wigs always buy the women. Unstated, but permeating every particle in that exchange of desire, is a profound, historical pain, a hurt based on the lie that the hair one was unlucky enough to be born with can never in this culture be good enough, is never beautiful as it is, and must be scorched by scalp-scalding chemicals into temporary straightness, because if that torment is not endured often from the tender age of four months old, how can one ever satisfy the unquenchable thirst to be desired or worthy of love?

The storage room containing the unusual treasure she seeks is now just a few feet away, but Ieesha stops at the station where she worked just two days ago, her red eyes glazing over with tears caused not by ragweed pollen, but by a memory suspended in the darkness.

She sees it all again. There she is, wearing her vinyl salon vest, its pockets filled with the tools of her trade. In her chair is an older customer, a heavy, high-strung Seattle city councilwoman. The salon was packed that afternoon, steamed by peopled humidity. A ceiling fan shirred air perfumed with the odor of burnt hair. The councilwoman wanted her hair straightened, not permed, for a political fundraiser she was hosting that week. But she couldn't—or wouldn't—sit quietly. She gossiped nonstop about everybody in city government as well as the 'do Gabby Douglass wore during the Olympics, blathering away in the kind of voice that carried right through you, that went inside like your ears didn't have any choice at all and had to soak up the words the way a sponge did water. All of a sudden, Ieesha sneezed. Her fingers slipped. She burned the old lady's left earlobe. The councilwoman flew from her seat, so enraged they had to peel her off the ceiling, shouting about how Ieesha didn't know the first thing about doing hair. She demanded that Frances fire her, and even took things a step further, saying with a stroke of scorn that anyone working in a beauty salon should be looking damned good herself, and that Ieesha didn't.

Frances was not a bad person to work for, far from it, and she knew my girlfriend was a first-rate cosmetologist. Even so, the owner of Sassy Hair Salon didn't want to lose someone on the city council who was a

twice-a-month, high-spending customer able to buy and sell her business twice over. As I was fixing our dinner of Top Ramen, Ieesha quietly came through the door of our apartment, still wearing her salon vest, her eyes burning with tears. She wears her hair in the neat, tight black halo she was born with, unadorned, simple, honest, uncontrived, as genuinely individual as her lips and nose. To some people she might seem as plain as characters in those old-timey plays, Clara in Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty* or Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. But Ieesha has the warm, dark, and rich complexion of Michelle Obama or Angela Bassett, which is, so help me, as gorgeous as gorgeous gets. Nevertheless, sometimes in the morning as she was getting ready for work, I'd catch her struggling to pull a pick through the burls and kinks of her hair with tears in her eyes as she looked in the mirror, tugging hardest at the nape of her neck, that spot called "the kitchen." I tell her she's beautiful as she is, but when she peers at television, movies, or popular magazines where generic, blue-eyed, blonde Barbie dolls with orthodontically perfect teeth, Botox, and breast implants prance, pose, and promenade, she says with a sense of fatality and resignation, "I can't look like that." She knows that whenever she steps out our door, it's guaranteed that a wound awaits her, that something will tell Ieesha that her hair and skin will never be good enough. All she has to do is walk into a store and be watched with suspicion, or have a cashier slap her change on the counter rather than place it on the palm of her outstretched hand. Or maybe read about the rodeo clown named Mike Hayhurst at the Creston Classic Rodeo in California who joked that "*Playboy* is offering Ann Romney \$250,000 to pose in that magazine and the White House is upset about it because *National Geographic* only offered Michelle Obama \$50 to pose for them."

Between bouts of blowing her nose loudly into a Kleenex in our tiny studio apartment, she cried the whole day she got fired, saying with a hopeless, plaintive hitch in her voice, "What's wrong with me?" Rightly or wrongly, she was convinced that she would never find another job during the Great Recession. That put everything we wanted to do on hold. Both of us were broke, with bills piling up on the kitchen counter after I got laid off from my part-time job as a substitute English teacher at Garfield High School. We were on food stamps and got our clothes from Goodwill. I tried to console her, first with kisses, then caresses, and before the night was over we had roof-raising sex. Afterward, and for the thousandth time, I came close to proposing that we get married. But I had a failure of nerve, afraid she'd temporize or say no, or that because we were so poor we needed to wait. To be honest, I was never sure if she saw me as Mr. Right or just as Mr. Right Now.



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So what I said to her that night, as we lay awake in each other's arms, our fingers intertwined, was that getting fired might just be the change of luck we'd been looking for. Frances was so busy with customers she didn't have time to change the locks. Or the code for the ADT alarm system. Naturally, Ieasha, who'd never stolen anything in her life, was reluctant, but I kept after her until she agreed.

Finally, after a few minutes, Ieasha enters the density of the storeroom's sooty darkness, feeling her way cat-footed, her arms outstretched. Among cardboard boxes of skin creams, conditioners, balms, and oils,

she locates the holy grail of hair in three pea-green duffel bags stacked against the wall, like rugs rolled up for storage. She drags a chair beneath the storeroom window, then starts tossing the bags into the alley. As planned, I'm waiting outside, her old Toyota Corolla dappled with rust idling behind me. I catch each bag as it comes through the window and throw it onto the backseat. The bags, I discover, weigh next to nothing. Yet for some reason, these sacks of something as common and plentiful as old hair are worth a lot of bank—why, I don't know. Or why women struggling to pay their rent, poor women forced to choose between food and their winter fuel bill, go into debt shelling out between \$1,000 and \$3,000 and sometimes as much as \$5,000 for a weave with real human hair. It baffled me until I read how some people feel that used things possess special properties. For example, someone on eBay bought Britney Spears's chewed gum for \$14,000, someone else paid \$115,000 for a handful of hair from Elvis Presley's pompadour, and his soiled, jockey-style shorts went on sale for \$16,000 at an auction in England. (No one, by the way, bought his unwashed skivvies.) Another person spent \$3,000 for Justin Timberlake's half-eaten French toast. I guess some of those eBay buyers feel closer to the person they admire, maybe even that something of that person's essence is magically clinging to the part they purchased.

As soon as Ieesha slides into the passenger seat, pulling off her ski mask and drawing short, hard breaths as if she's been running up stairs, my foot lightly applies pressure to the gas pedal and I head for the freeway, my elbow out the window, my fingers curled on the roof of the car. Within fifteen minutes, we're back at our place. I park the car, and we sling the bags over our shoulders, carry them inside to our first-floor unit, and stack them on the floor between the kitchenette and the sofa bed we sleep on. Ieesha sits down on a bedsheet still twisted from the night before, when we were joined at the groin. She knocks off her shoes run down at the heel and rubs her ankles. She pulls a couple of wigs and a handful of hair extensions from one of the bags. She spreads them on our coffee table, frowning, then sits with her shoulders pulled in, as if waiting for the ceiling to cave in.

"We're gonna be okay," I say.

"I don't know." Her voice is soft, sinus-clogged. "Tyrone, I don't feel good about this. I can't stop shaking. We're *not* burglars."

"We are now." I open a bottle of Bordeaux we've been saving to celebrate, filling up our only wineglass for her and a large jam jar for myself. I sit down beside her and pick up one of the wigs. Its texture between my fingertips is fluffy. I say, "You can blame Frances. She should have

stood up for you. She *owes* you. What we need to do now is think about our next step. Where we can sell this stuff.” Ieesha’s head jerks backward when I reach for one of the wigs and put it on her head, just out of curiosity. Reluctantly, she lets me place it there, and I ask, “What’s that feel like? A stocking cap? Is it hot?”

“I don’t know. It feels...”

She never tells me how it feels.

So I ask another question. “What makes this hair so special? Where does it come from?”

Hands folded in her lap, she sits quietly, and, for an instant, the wig, whose obsidian tresses pool around her face, makes her look like someone I don’t know. All of a sudden, I’m not sure what she might do next, but what she *does* do, after clearing her throat, is give me the hair-raising history and odyssey behind the property we’ve stolen. The bags, she says, come from a Buddhist temple near New Delhi, where young women shave their heads in an ancient ceremony of sacrifice called Pabbajja. They give up their hair to renounce all vanity, and this letting go of things cosmetic and the chimera called the ego is their first step as nuns on the path to realizing that the essence of everything is emptiness. The hair ceremony is one of the 84,000 “dharma gates.” On the day their heads were shaved, the women had kneeled in their plain saris, there in the temple *naos*, and took two hundred forty vows, the first five of which were *no killing, no lying, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and no drinking of alcohol*. They didn’t care what happened to their hair after the ceremony. Didn’t know it would be sewn, stitched, and stapled onto the scalps of other people. But Korean merchants were there. They paid the temple’s abbot ten dollars for each head of fibrous protein. After that, the merchants, who controlled this commerce as tightly as the mafia did gambling, washed the hair clean of lice. From India, where these women cultivated an outward life of simplicity and an inward life free from illusion, the merchants transported the discarded, dead hair halfway around the planet, where, ironically, it was cannibalized as commerce in a nine-billion-dollar hair-extension industry devoted precisely to keeping women forever enslaved to the eyes of others.

As she explains all this, Ieesha leaves her wine untasted, and I don’t say anything because my brain is stuttering, stalling on the unsyllabled thought that if you tug on a single, thin strand of hair, which has a life span of five-and-a-half years, you find it raddled to the rest of the world. I didn’t see any of that coming until it arrived. I lift the jar of wine straight to my lips, empty it, and set it down with a click on the coffee table. When I look back at Ieesha, I realize she’s smiling into one cheek,

as if remembering a delicious secret she can't share with me. That makes me down a second jar of Bordeaux. Then a third. I wonder, does the wig she's wearing itch or tingle? Does it feel like touching Justin Timberlake's unfinished French toast? Now the wine bottle is empty. We've got nothing on the empty racks of the refrigerator but a six-pack of beer, so I rise from the sofa to get that, a little woozy on my feet, careening sideways toward the kitchenette, but my full bladder redirects me toward the cubicle that houses our shower and toilet. I click on the light, close the door, and brace myself with one hand pressed against the wall. Standing there for a few minutes, my eyes closed, I feel rather than hear a police siren, and our smoke alarm. My stomach clenches.

Coming out of the bathroom, I find the wig she was wearing and the weaves that were on the coffee table burning in a wastebasket. Ieesha stands in the middle of the room, her cell phone pressed against her ear.

"What are you doing?" Smoke is stinging my eyes. "Who are you talking to?"

Her eyes are quiet. Everything about her seems quiet when she says, "911."

"Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

I stare at her in wonder. She's offered us up, the way the women did their hair at the temple in New Delhi. I rush to draw water from the kitchen sink to put out the fire. I start throwing open the windows as there comes a loud knock, then pounding at the door behind me, but I can't take my eyes off her. She looks vulnerable but not weak, free, and more than enough for herself. I hear the wood of the door breaking, but as if from a great distance, because suddenly I know, and she knows, that I understand. She's letting go of all of it—the inheritance of hurt, the artificial and the inauthentic, the absurdities of color and caste stained at their roots by vanity and bondage to the body—and in this evanescent moment, when even I feel as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, she has never looked more beautiful and spiritually centered. There's shouting in the room now. Rough hands throw me facedown on the floor. My wrists are cuffed behind my back. Someone is reciting my Miranda rights. Then I feel myself being lifted to my feet. But I stop midway, resting on my right knee, my voice shaky as I look up at Ieesha, and say:

"Will you marry me?"

Two policemen lead her toward the shattered door, our first steps toward that American monastery called prison. She half turns, smiling, looking back at me, and her head nods: *yes, yes, yes.*