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Matt Koch
Tarrant County College District

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Hair

by Matt Koch

When Amanda Jenkins first met her father-in-law to be six years ago, she was terrified by his baldness. Not thinning. Bald, with only an alabaster dome atop that sturdy neck. A year later, when her husband awoke on his thirtieth birthday with his garish mane of curls fully intact, she silently welcomed the occasion with an apoplectic rush of relief. In college, she had boasted frequently to her Tri-Delt sisters about never, EVER, being a party to the proliferation of the baldness gene. And, of course, such proclamations were easily made and received back then because none of them had ever dated a balding man (save for “Big” Bernice, who didn’t count), and each of them had considered herself immune to the stooping that was suggestive of physical compromise in a mate.

It’s not as if she would have loved her husband any less over something so superficial. Surely she wouldn’t have, Amanda told herself on that fortuitous birthday morning. To evade over-analysis, she abruptly shifted her image to that of a martyr—the beautiful bride who unflinchingly stands by her kind, homely husband. Yes, Amanda thought, if she had had to love a bald man, she would have salvaged admiration as the adroitly evolved woman with enough humanistic compassion to see the whole person beyond the flesh. “Mature”—they would have called her.

Lately, however, Tim’s thick coif of auburn curls irked her. All the other men in his family were either balding or bald, and who did he think he was to circumvent genetics? Harold, her father-in-law, was such a halcyon of a husband that it seemed to her that Tim’s insolent follicles were flouting not just sebum but the very prototype of his father as a man. Really the unadorned scalp and doughy white face were only minor flaws easily eclipsed by his character. After all, stout provider that he was, Harold had put four children through college. More importantly to Amanda, though,

was Harold's abstinence from alcohol. He didn't go out with lowlife friends the way Tim continued to. One night, she dreamed she was passionately kissing her husband when his hair began shedding, sloughing off until the starkness of Harold's head morphed before her and continued probing her mouth with his tongue. She awoke with a shiver that morning, but by midday she was texting Mary Catherine about it with giggly emojis.

On the morning of Tim's thirty-fifth birthday, Amanda awoke with anxiety. Wifely birthday expectations, she felt, were merely nostalgic reprisals of gawky teenage roles for a couple in their thirties. No one really had the time to build a cake from scratch at that age—except for those showy DIY bitches on Instagram—and buying one from the Whole Foods bakery didn't prove much when the money was plucked from their joint checking account. And then there's the matter of birthday sex. How awkward and stilted for an arbitrarily designated day to dictate her hormonal moods? When DID oral sex become the prescription for marital bliss? Amanda thought about it for a minute and then blamed Bill Clinton. How exactly was straining one's neck first thing in the day, before even her morning cup of coffee, a pronouncement of spontaneous devotion?

As for this birthday morning, however, Amanda awoke not to an entreating erection beside her but to the vacancy of crumpled sheets. Probably running. Tim was always running these days. Running to the corner bodega for kombucha tea. Running not just to meet his douche-y friends at whatever-that-place's-name-is with the cheap beer served in grooved plastic pitchers, but sometimes after work off to the Bedford L and under the silent churning of the East River to God-knows-where. Or, just jogging.

It began as a clumsy flirtation with heart health: no more than 15 or 20 minutes in the cool mornings and wearing, if you can fathom it, those ghastly gray sweats that Lady had visibly chewed through when she was teething. That she was ambivalent about Tim's physician-recommended regimen gripped Amanda with guilt. He had padded his lower abdomen in the years since college with a soft, squishy mound that gently wrapped around his torso like a

child's hug. Then that all melted away, and those early morning schlepps around the block became 30, 40 minute, sometimes hour-long sojourns clad in a black matching Under Armour outfit with some damn moisture-reduction technology. Of the two of them, Amanda had been the one to run cross country in college, and in fact, she was the one who nudged him to buy his first legitimate distance running shoes (they had taken three trains and a bus to reach the New Balance outlet in Long Island that carried the model she had picked for him—a something v3, which was supposed to promote stability). Back then, she had needed a companion for her own morning runs and was surprised at how eagerly he took to it, despite his bulky frame. Then, once she breached her early thirties, Amanda's energy waned, and her formerly languid mornings felt cracked into tiny flaccid parts, each submerged under the daily minutia of yanking Lady down to the far corner of the park to poop or grinding Tim's Arabica beans that he just as easily could have ground in the grocery store's machine.

Amanda ran, too, she often reassured herself—only in the opposite direction. Her purge began by sloughing off first CrossFit classes followed shortly thereafter by her Bikram Yoga membership. Her friends universally attributed the latter move to either some hushed financial downturn or else a sign of depression—likely both. Among them, only Mary Catherine offered a dissenting opinion, loyally pronouncing that the couple was just fine. In reality, Amanda had simply trimmed her morning routine—subbing yoga videos on YouTube in place of the stinky studio of taut, grunting bodies. By contrast to Tim's increasingly messy and truncated morning exits, she was mechanizing. She knew precisely where to find each nighttime clothing item he had strewn across the living room before changing into his running gear. Before even looking, she brought to the kitchen table a sopping wet paper towel, ready to erase the tepid little puddles of splashed coffee that had oxidized into tarry black swamps. Preserving the edges of her morning awarded precious extra moments to perfect her poses or to elongate her stretches. True, her glamor muscles weren't as toned as they once had been, but her core was stronger. She even brushed aside the more agitated pleas from her friends when she chopped her tangled

waves of hair into a more manageable pixie. It was a throwback look that reminded her of childhood summers upstate—skinned knees, dirty fingernails, fluorescent grass stains, climbing tree trunks late into the humid evenings that were illuminated by the spectral flash of lightning bugs. Somehow, though, it stung when Tim compared her, not unlovingly, to Peter Pan. A glancing blow, but it was enough to knock her off balance, as she swore off the look, facing first an even more unwieldy intermediate stage of hair reclamation.

Still awaiting Tim's hulking, dripping body to trudge through her door, Amanda rolled over to her side and snatched at her scuffed phone from the decorative wicker box, which she had flipped upside down to serve as a makeshift night stand. Extending her probing digits without focusing on the slick target, she succeeded only in fumbling the phone with an echoing clack onto the distressed bamboo flooring that superficially coated the apartment.

"Fucking great!" yelled Amanda, inspiring Lady to spring erect, arching her blond back and cocking her head dumbly at the agitated human face and its foreign missive.

"Cracked. Damn it! Why can nothing ever be easy for me?" Lady probed at the compromised phone with her comically wide snout. "Stop, just stop it, Lady!" Accustomed to loud rebuke by her mother, the dog regarded it, as always, with irritability rather than submission—shrieking her head back and forth with a volley of barks.

"Please, Lady!" Amanda had begun a nearly tearless, gyrating cry. "I have nothing for him. He'll be home, and I've done nothing!" After a couple abortive attempts, she finally steadied her hand sufficiently to place a call. The name "Mary Catherine" illuminated across the screen, and after only three or four rings the maddeningly serene voicemail message switched on.

"Great. Decline my call just when I really need to talk to someone. My friends suck." She then tossed the phone onto the bed, instigating a second string of shrieking barks from the yellow lab.

"What the hell's Lady bitching about?" Tim stood, wet but

not quite exhausted, in the doorway. His complexion, ruddy, was beaded with moisture, and the locks at his temples tucked into regal curls.

"Oh, hi there. Nothing, she's been crazy all morning. Happy birthday, handsome man!"

"Thanks. Did you take her out yet? Or feed her?" Not exhausted, but what was it? Smug, Amanda thought—and who completes a morning run with such—conceit, yes that was the word. She felt mocked by his simpering composure.

"That's probably it," Tim continued. "She just wants us to get up and get going. Don't you, pretty girl!" Lady voraciously lapped up the sweat from his wrists and hands while he scratched her domed head and behind her floppy ears.

"What do you wanna do for your birthday? I—I had this whole thing planned, but, well, I don't know—let's just do whatever you want. That OK?"

Tim chuckled and took a step toward his wife. "Whatever I want, huh?"

Amanda instinctively staggered backward before squeezing out a wry laughing smile. "Oh, come on, I haven't even dressed or brushed my teeth," and before he could attempt to iron out her loose hygienic trepidations, she ducked under his outstretched arm that had been steadying him against the wall and darted deftly to the bathroom, surprising even herself with the burst of agility.

The next morning, Amanda woke up like a half-wracked goddess—that is, her head pounded and her left arm was asleep, but she was pleased by her navigation through the scummy waters where expectation flows into desire. She had, Amanda reasoned, maintained her balance while dangerously maneuvering atop the question of sex and conjugal need.

It had been brilliant—an icy platter of Little Neck oysters followed by plates of steamed mussels, flaky white scallops, and lobster tail accompanied by an unctuous pool of garlic-infused butter the color of motor oil that men poured from black plastic canisters on those commercials. Amanda imagined these supple, viscous indulgences

as a sensual extension—or, rather, even a surrogate. The best part of her plan, though, was the free flow of the claret. Not the most natural pairing with shell fish, but Amanda loved the light body and squarely clean finish. It evaded the weighty maroon of Burgundy in favor of a soft airy hue, like fresh blood. To her it seemed to possess a playful carnality that they each lapped up from one bottle a piece.

After stumbling the four blocks home, Amanda and Tim clunked through the stern iron gate, over a few cold concrete steps, and then up a single internal staircase to their sheet metal door on the left. Once they had breached the apartment entrance, Amanda thrust an open-mouthed kiss upon her husband, teasing the hair on the back of his neck with her spindly fingers. His lips, encircling hers, felt like home for the first time in ages, and his breath, gently sweetened by the wine into almost a tangy ginger, tasted carelessly exotic. For a minute, she lost herself in the confident guiding motions of his mouth while the hypnotic circling of his hands on her shoulders and back interacted blissfully with the warm alcoholic tingle throughout her body.

Just as she was about to step joyfully from her familiar precipice of restraint into the dark wading pools of connubial abandon, her overactive mind switched on with the jarring punch of a refrigerator compressor. She worried that she would disappoint him—that he would press up against her naked body and feel scratchy hairs that didn't belong or lumpy deposits of fat—that Lady would poke her wet nose at their entwined bodies and bark at them—or, simply, her husband would recognize that she wasn't enough for him. Feeling a chilly pall descend upon her body, she excused herself to the restroom. There she deliberately peeled out of her evening dress, scrubbed her face, brushed her teeth, flossed, applied white globs of lotion to her legs, then lighter moisturizer to her face, and finally sat on the toilet for several minutes. When she returned to the bedroom, Tim lay supine atop the bed in his Oxford shirt, having managed, apparently, to have undone three additional buttons and to have kicked his loafers to the wall before he had given up. Hearing the soft rumblings of a snore escape his lips, Amanda sighed, serenely embracing her reprieve.

Several days after his birthday, Tim rushed down the whitewashed concrete steps, fingering tenderly the cast iron banister that stood roughly indifferent to his roaming hands. Forgetting the upturned patch of busted sidewalk that buffeted besieged tenants at the gate, he tripped and staggered forward until redirecting his gifted inertia into a bursting sprint. He always jogged this stretch of the block, even when scrapping the run, at least until rounding the corner toward the subway station—just in case Amanda in all her neuroses were to stare out the window after him.

Before dropping down into the dark mouth of the L station, he plucked his phone from his shorts, checking once more for a message from Mary Catherine. Instead, he found only a stale series of morning texts from Amanda—reminders, forwarded memes, and finally her refrain: “Do you love me?!!” He felt his fingers typing back “yes” but neglected to affix his requisite parenthetical, “of course!”



He considered his next move, splaying apart his broad hand and whisking aside a tuft of auburn hair that had fallen limp past his temple, having succumbed to mid-summer humidity. It didn’t appear that Mary Catherine would reach out to him momentarily, and Tim was loathe to commit to a subway ride under the East River without a plan for his deposit in Manhattan, especially while caught in his mesh shorts. As for actually running, this was a wholesome plausibility—an act that would notch one more blot of ink on the truthful side of his ethical ledger with Amanda. But, this path would preclude him from seeing Mary Catherine even if she did text him since there simply would be no time for a shower at her place.

Instead, Tim began to walk. For several blocks he marched,

vaguely seeking a secluded spot to think. It didn't really need to be secluded. In fact, Tim often enjoyed watching young families at the park on blankets or old patriarchs gesturing to one another on benches and matching conversational crescendos in foreign tongues. When he and Amanda had first moved to the neighborhood, the park had been a peaceful urban island that reminded them, as they often both remarked, of the dreamy idleness of college life. Recently, however, the park had become the setting of fights. Often there were tears. And shrill shouts—the kind that inspire tanning prone millennials to jut upward their smooshed sideways faces with a sudden visible clenching of the trapezius.

"We should buy a picnic basket!" suggested Amanda upon their first dedicated summer evening at the park.

"That would be fun! And next time, we'll bring Lady."

"It feels so much better now that the sun's disappeared." Amanda swatted at first one leg, then the other, and began clawing wildly up and down her calves. "I just wish the mosquitos would disappear with it." Amanda's mauve lips attempted a pacifying smile that stalled halfway across her pretty mouth and manifested instead as an unsettling crook at the corner. Seeking and not finding approbation on Tim's face, she began to feel the unctuous effects of the day's lingering humidity. She scanned the women atop blankets, many of them younger, contented within taut, careless bodies exuding a swirling amalgam of gently simmering flesh and sweet coconut lotions.

"We'll remember bug spray next time. Come on, let's just plop down on the grass here and hangout for a bit."

"Here? Do you not see that giant ant hill right there?" Immediately she regretted her choice of words, which had come out more as an unconscious twitch than a directed verbalization.

"OK, Amanda," Tim hissed. "It doesn't have to literally be right here. I just meant in general that we could sit and chill out for a minute."

"I'm sorry! Jesus!" howled back Amanda. "It's just that these damn mosquitos won't leave me alone." Through a failed attempt

to block out an importunate itch on her ankle she managed only to delay responding until the sensation had built up into a monstrous attack. Doubling over unceremoniously she frantically scraped at her ankle with large blunt nails. In this position she felt a bunched band of flesh protruding around her midsection. Suddenly she became aware of a droplet of sweat that, originating at the apex of her legs, ran down her thigh. Her bangs were sticking in patches to her greasy forehead. Tim's overgrown coif, she noticed, petulantly reached upward all around his rounded skull, granting her already tall husband even more height.

"No, I'm sorry," exhaled Tim. "You're uncomfortable. Let's just leave." He slinked up next to her and attempted to rub a hand against her back. She balked at the gesture.

"Don't. I—I feel gross. Sorry, that's not your fault. Please, I want to leave, that's all. Do you love me? You're probably so annoyed with me right now. You still love me, right?"

"Of course I love you, little girl!"

Tim passed a dimly lit bodega without a soul inhabitant save for the scowling face of the aging Korean proprietor. Even the orange long-haired bodega tomcat had strayed out to the sidewalk nearer the bus stop where he lay, nuzzling his furry cheeks into the palm of a stranger's warm hand.

"Hi, Seamus!" whispered Tim as he passed, scratching the cat's lower back, which perked up in response.

After checking his phone once more, Tim assessed the situation. Still no text from Mary Catherine and instead a barrage of missed calls from Amanda—plus a recent text that scrolled across the top of the screen reading, "Why won't you answer?!! Tim, why are you ignoring me?!!!" Sighing, he clicked the lower button on the side of his phone until the slash appeared across the volume symbol and released the phone down into the smooth polyester cocoon of his shorts. Onward he traipsed, passing along his improvisational path uniformed auxiliary police, giggling Polish girls who seemed to share some adolescent confidence, sweaty parcel delivery men who cringed behind the weight of their packages while nodding fraternally to Tim as he passed. All of them performed their jobs,

vocationally or socially, with either neutral or smiling faces. The whole city, it seemed to Tim, was functioning as it should—as a continuous symbiotic flow, like disparate organs in the body.

Before long, he found himself edging up against the Newtown



Creek as café patios and buzzing storefronts had given way to shuddered windows and “Retail Space For Lease” signs where the meandering road limped to a finish at the water bank with cracked, jagged pavement beneath the shattered green glass of beer bottles. Tim paused. From this vantage point he could see to his left the towering cluster of Manhattan’s Midtown East that stood, imposing, almost like a manmade counterpart to the Redwoods of the Pacific Northwest. Straight ahead was the Pulaski Bridge that led over the creek and into Queens. On the verge of pivoting and slinking the several blocks back to his apartment and Amanda, he remembered the phone sagging, weighty, in his front pocket, and he mounted the steps to the bridge.

Halfway across the water was a landing with a chipped wooden bench that had originally been painted a cardinal red before fading into a fallow brown. Tim sat. He stared off not at the Manhattan skyscrapers but at the laughing gulls circling across the sky. How odd, he mused, that they’ve found their way up from their usual home in the Rockaways to this apex of Brooklyn-Manhattan-Queens. Seizing upon a random impulse, Tim began to yank upward at each calf to position himself in a meditation pose. Before fully crisscrossing his trunk-like legs, however, he imagined having to explain himself to one of Amanda’s friends, were one to chance upon him in this compromising position. So, midway through his awkward contortion, he gave up and lost himself instead in the swirling birds above that swooped in sensuous circles.

Then, a preternatural howl pierced the wind at his back, startling Tim from his coiled repose.

“Tim,” barked Amanda, stomping toward him, her face stained with tears.

Without thinking he sprang up, arched his back and wordlessly turned away from his crying wife. Compelled by some animal response, by a chemical reaction of the adrenal cortex, he ran. Not quite a sprint, but close—a confident stride. Behind him he could hear the slapping of Amanda’s leathery sandals on the pavement, the cadence quickly escalating to an allegro. Tim’s flesh responded admirably, as thrusts of blood rushed through his veins, coaxing his

muscles to extend and flex.

“Tim, please! Wait for me!” yelled Amanda at his back. “Please, why are you doing this to me?”

Her cries reached his ears soon only as the distant whimpers of a child as he had achieved a sizable separation between them. Some faraway twinge of filial nostalgia seized upon his chest, nearly arresting his flight. But then he saw just up ahead a pillar hoisting a green sign that read, “Welcome to Queens,” and as he approached this threshold, he felt from far atop his thick buoyant stacks of hair a droplet of salty sweat that fell into his open mouth. He resolved that he could never again turn back to Amanda. So, he crossed into the borough of Queens, still running, and Amanda’s voice was lost with the wind.

