

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

Ben Watson
Snip

"JOHN," MY MOM SAYS IN HER WE'RE-NOT-GOING-TO-ARGUE-ABOUT-THIS VOICE. "IT'S TIME."

I gulp. "It's not that long," I mumble, running my hand through my wiry black hair. My head tingles as hundreds of different memories try to pop to the surface. I shove them down and keep focused on our conversation. Spacing off wouldn't help my case.

"Just look at yourself," Mom instructs, grabbing my head and yanking it towards the living room mirror. I can't help but sigh. My hair really is getting shaggy. I usually try to keep it short enough that I can spike it up, but now it's gotten so long that I have to let it lie flat. It hangs over my ears, almost all the way down my neck, and it's so thick that it looks black instead of brown. People at school have already been making jokes about it. Sure, it's not too bad yet, but things will get pretty nasty if I let it grow out much further.

"It doesn't look that bad, right?" I ask, trying not to sound too desperate.

"Honey," my mom says, "you know how it works. When your hair gets too long, it has to be cut. That's just the way it is. Do you really want to be one of those long-hair boys?"

I shudder. Everyone gets their hair cut because if they don't, they look all ugly. I guess that would probably be enough to put the long-hairs at the bottom of the pack. But it's not just that. Long-hairs don't follow the rules, which means they have to get punished. I remember a few weeks ago, a guy named Jordan tried to go long-hair on us. Some of my friends cornered him after school and chopped off all his hair with a pocketknife. The kid's like a vegetable now.

"Okay. I guess I'll go," I say.

"There, it's settled," Mom says. "We'll go to that new place downtown. I'll even get you ice cream afterwards."

I nod and pull a sticky note and a pencil out of my pocket. I scribble out, "Mom promised me ice cream after the haircut."

Mom groans. "I used to be able to promise you all kinds of things before haircuts, 'till you started writing everything down."

"A deal's a deal," I reply, a bit smug.

She pats me on the shoulder. "That's if you can still read afterwards."

"I can usually read. I think." Mom just laughs at me again.

"Well last time you got a haircut, you forgot how to talk."

"I did not!" she says, but she laughs too.

We walk out to the car, and Mom doesn't complain as I hop into the driver's seat. We usually fight over who gets to drive, but never on the

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way to a haircut—there’s a good chance I won’t be able to drive afterwards.

I grip the cold wheel firmly, my hands shaking. I take long, deep breaths, trying to calm myself down, but it doesn’t really work. Normally, haircuts are really scary for me. I mean, who wouldn’t be scared? But this haircut... it’s never been this bad before.

See, three weeks ago, I met a girl named Lily. She has the prettiest white hair, with just a little curl, and she always smells like flowers. When I met her, my first thought was that it was unfair that she can be so pretty while having such long hair. And then my second thought was just that she was really pretty. That was my third thought too, and pretty much all my thoughts after that.

For some reason, I decided I was going to tell her so. I was a bit too nervous to get the whole sentence out, so I just sort of pointed at her and said, “Pretty”.

She only laughed at me a little bit, which made me confident. So the next time I saw her, I managed to say six whole words to her. And then, we actually had a full conversation, which led to a date, and then my first kiss.

Sometimes I get just as nervous as I was on the first day, and I stutter instead of talking. But she just smiles at me, takes my hand, and says, “I know. Pretty.” Everyone calls it puppy love, but I don’t really get why. She’s way more loveable than puppies.

“Focus,” my mom says. I realize that I’ve been stopped at a green light for a long time. Lots of cars are making loud, honking noises. I should probably know what those noises mean, but, well, there’s probably a lot of stuff I should know.

“It really is time for a haircut, huh?” My mom says. I don’t reply. If I open my mouth, mean things might come out.

We arrive at the only barber shop I can remember using. My mom comments on how nice the place is and how great the prices are, like she does every time we come here. I can’t decide if she does this for my sake or if she actually doesn’t remember the haircuts we’ve gotten here.

She leads me over to the front counter where we’re greeted by a girl who looks a few years older than me. She has red hair about a half inch long.

“You’re not gonna cut my hair, right?” I ask, before she can say anything.

“No, no,” she replies, laughing. I sigh in relief. I don’t want someone with such short hair to use scissors near my head.

The woman ushers me over to the chair, sits me down, and cocoons me in the black plastic. After a few moments, a man approaches me. He has soft, intelligent eyes and hair so long it almost touches his armpits. I can’t help but feel annoyed at the hypocrisy of this long-hair barber, even though this was probably the only job that a long-hair like him could get; they barely let long-hairs into public restrooms, let alone good jobs.

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He gets right to the point. "How long would you like it?"

"About half its current length," my mom calls from the waiting area. My stomach clenches into a tight, little knot. I have a fifty percent chance. Fifty percent to remember, fifty percent to forget.

"Relax," the barber says in a soft, agreeable voice. He sets his hands on my shoulders and grips them, trying to get me steady. It doesn't really work. My whole body is shaking like a leaf.

Gently, he runs a black comb through my hair. I can feel my head tingle as the bristles caress my head. Hundreds of different memories try to surface, and with the comb continually brushing my hair, it's hard to shove them back down. Every single strand of hair stores different memories, different bits of knowledge and emotion. And I really don't want to have him cut them in half.

But everyone has to get their hair cut.

I feel the scissor blades slide softly through my mind. As they wrap around a single lock of hair, a memory surfaces violently, pushing everything else away. For a brief moment, I'm not in the haircut salon anymore; I'm back in my usual desk at school. I'm surrounded by my friends, and we're chatting while we wait for algebra to start.

The memory is so vivid that for a second, I actually think it's real. I actually think I'm back there. I mean, I can see the powdery chalkboard up front, the cheesy math posters on the walls, the windows, the clock, and the dull, eggshell wallpaper. I can hear my friends gossiping, and I can feel my own voice joining in with them. I can even smell the gentle scents of rubber, chalk, and sweat that always seem to fill the class. For a moment, I feel calm and content, living in the memory.

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And it's gone. I look around, trying to make sense of the gaping hole in my mind.

"Keep your head still, please," the barber says. He slides the scissors into my hair once more.

And suddenly, I'm not in the little barber shop. I'm lying in a soft, grassy meadow with sunlight streaming down on my face. I'm reading the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: my favorite book. According to my mom, I've read it like fifty times. The wind is ruffling my hair, causing the pages of my book to hover. A little blue butterfly glides down from the sky, coming to a gentle stop on my book. It crawls onto my finger, its tiny limbs tickling me. I laugh and hold it up, seeing sunbeams pass through the semi-transparent wings. It flaps its wings again—slowly, to remind me of its presence.

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I gasp, and look down at my finger. I can't remember why, but it seems like there's supposed to be something on it. I frown, trying to figure out why my finger feels so empty.

"Head up," the barber instructs, grabbing my chin. The scissors push through my hair again.

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I'm in a classroom, surrounded by paints and pencils. Seeing different drawings all around me. Running a paintbrush down an empty canvas, trying to mimic the gentle motion of water as it trickles down the side of a cliff. Smelling the sharp odor of paint. Hearing the almost deafening silence of concentration.

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I gasp, but the scissors return again and again.

Climbing through a tree, surrounded by leaves, feeling the rough bark crumble away beneath my fingers.

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Lying in my bed in the dark of night. Staring out the window, wishing that for once, I could fall right to sleep.

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Tripping over a sheet of paper, and skinning my knee on the concrete.

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Seeing Lily for the first time. Watching her soft, white hair bounce up and down. Our eyes locking, blue meeting brown.

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"No!" I shout, jerking my head upright.

"What's wrong?" the barber asks, holding the scissors in the midst of my hair.

"I... I don't know..." The panic dies, and hesitantly, I relax my body, putting my head in the proper position. "Sorry."

"It's quite alright," The barber replies. "We're almost done. Here, take a look."

Hesitantly, I glance at my reflection. My long, shaggy hair is cut short, and the barber even spiked it up for me. It looks nice. Sure, I don't even remember getting here. Or where I came from to get here. Or... what here even is. But I can figure stuff like that out later. For now, I just know that my hair looks good.

The barber draws the teeth of his scissors around my last lock of hair. As the blades caress each strand, hours and hours of memories fly at me.

Sitting with Lily, just holding hands and talking.

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Eating lunch with her every single day.

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Telling her that I want more than anything to be a scientist, to make great discoveries that make people's lives better.

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Telling her that sometimes I lie awake all night, terrified that I'm going to forget her, and even more terrified that she's going to forget me.

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Leaning over, and pressing my lips to hers...

"No!" I shout, jumping out of my chair. I run my fingers through my hair, finding three strands that are still long. Just three little hairs. I grab them, and wrap my fingers around them protectively, feeling my memories of Lily stir. I know, deep down, that these three little hairs are all I have left of her.

"We can stop now, if you'd like," the barber says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"No, we can't," my mom says, walking over to me. "John, sit down and let him finish."

"I'm not gonna forget her," I say, backing away.

"You're being ridiculous."

"No! This is wrong!" I scream, looking around the room. "Can't you see that? Can't any of you see that? It shouldn't have to be this way! I shouldn't have to forget her!" No one speaks. Not my mom, not the receptionist with the cropped hair, not the other people who are getting their memories sliced in half, not even the long-hair barber. The silence cuts into me like scissor blades.

"This... this is wrong," I whimper.

"Don't worry," Mom says. "You'll still see her at school. I'm sure you kids can still date. It'll be just fine."

"But how do you know we'll be together? How do you know it won't be like you and Dad?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember?" I ask, staring into her glassy blue eyes. "He left! He went to get a haircut, and he never came back! Just like every other guy you went out with. One of you always forgets and leaves, and it's never okay!"

"Huh. I guess I just forgot," she says.

"Then... then what if you forget me?" My voice cracks on the last word. I look over at the barber, and for a second, I imagine that I understand him. I imagine his long hair isn't so that he can greedily grasp at some important memory. No, he keeps his hair long so he can remember kids like me. The ones who break while they're being sliced by his scissors.

"I can't do this Mom," I whisper. "It hurts too much."

"Don't you see?" Mom says, taking my face in her hands. "It doesn't hurt. If you can't remember, you don't feel pain. When you cut those last little hairs, it won't hurt. You won't remember the pain. I promise."

"I don't want to forget."

"Honey," my mom says, "you know how it works. When hair gets too long, it has to be cut."

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I think for a few moments. This is inevitable. If I don't lose her today, I'll lose her in a week, or in two weeks, when my friends at school see my long hairs and punish me for them. Or I'll lose her the next time around, or the time after that, because when I have to choose between keeping my future or my past, I'll pick my future every time.

Or, worst of all, I'll lose her when she goes into the barber, gets her mind chopped in half, and forgets all about me. One day she will walk in the door and she won't have a clue who I am and I won't be able to take it. It'll break me into little pieces. It's so, so selfish. But if I don't forget her, then I'll have to face the pain of her forgetting me, and I'm just not strong enough.

One of us will forget. It might as well be me.

As the scissors surround the last three hairs, the memory of us kissing returns. I feel her warm lips press mine. I feel all of my emotions—all of my love and desire and happiness, and all of the things I wanted to say but could never put into words—rise to the surface. I know that Lily is special, and that we really have something together. And I know that in a few seconds, it will all be gone, and I'll be sitting here wondering why there are tears on my face.

My mom will be there for me too, up until she forgets me. I'll keep finding cute girls to have relationships with, and some will last long enough for me to have kids. And when my kids scream and cry in the face of their haircuts, I'll tell them the same thing my mom told me, even though I'll have long since forgotten her, too. I'll tell them that if you can't remember, you don't feel pain.

And maybe, just maybe, I'll be right.

"Goodbye Lily," I whisper, closing my eyes.

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