

A DECENT HAIRCUT

by John Boyne

I placed the last piece of tinsel in the box, closed the lid above it, taped it tightly shut, and wrote the word 'Christmas' across the seal in large, black letters with a magic marker. A huge grin crossed my face as I hid it in the corner of the attic, behind a pile of old suitcases, the artificial tree and an unused dartboard. There was a sense of relief in putting it away for another eleven months, a feeling only challenged by the claustrophobia I felt at being stuck in such a dark, damp, closed-in area of the house. I never liked being up there and had tried to persuade one of the children - Peter, I think - to go up instead of me but every time his head crept through into the darkness and his small trainer pressed down into my hands while I helped to push him up, he screamed and fell back on top of me and we both collapsed onto the bathroom floor, narrowly avoiding cracking one or both of our heads open on the side of the bath.

When I went back down to the kitchen, Julia, my wife, was pouring herself a large scotch. There was no water visible on the table.

'You're starting early,' I said, glancing at my watch. 'It's not half past six yet.'

'It's to calm my nerves,' she said, tossing her hair away from her face in an instinctive gesture, despite the fact that, to my great despair, there was hardly any hair left to toss. She had got it bobbed just before Christmas, despite my pleadings with her to leave well alone, and every time she threw her head back now her hair stayed exactly where it was and she looked as if she was about to have a seizure, or had recently suffered a stroke. The previous evening, my sister had brought her new boyfriend over for dinner and I could see that the gesture terrified him. (For the record, I don't think their relationship will last and I mean to tell her so. He drinks alcohol-free beer which I for one consider to be the height of bad manners and suggestive of a difficult childhood and a complex relationship with an older, matriarchal figure, such as a frosty aunt or an ancient grandmother.) 'Christmas always leaves me feeling defeated,' added Julia after a moment.

'Depleted,' I responded, looking away from her and towards a shelf of glasses. I wondered whether I should join her. 'It leaves you feeling depleted,' I repeated.

'No,' she said clearly. 'If that's what I meant, Christopher, then that's what I would have said. It leaves me feeling defeated. As if I've lost something. As if it's beaten me once again.'

I snorted and decided that drink was probably the right way to go and poured a shot for myself. 'What time do we have to pick Friend up at?' I asked her. Friend was our daughter, christened Julia as well, but for some reason we called her 'Friend'. It sounded almost ironic. As if she was really a distant stranger or an enemy of long standing. It felt like we were trying to distance our relationship from her.

'Not till eight,' she said. 'But don't drink another one of those, Mister, because you're doing the driving. I'm damned if I'm setting one foot outside of this house tonight.'

'Right,' I said. 'Fair enough.' Naturally, it wasn't fair enough, nothing about our relationship is fair enough, but I wasn't in the mood to argue. Elaine, my girlfriend, says that I should stand up to her when she makes decisions like this for me but as I keep telling her, what's the point, honey, what's the

point? Julia's a sensible, intelligent woman with good fashion sense and excellent personal hygiene and I'm perfectly happy to leave all the major decisions to her. Even the ones that affect me. *Especially* the ones that affect me. The chances are that she'll make the right ones and we'll both be the happier for it.

'I have to go out afterwards,' I said after a moment. 'After I pick up Friend, I mean. I'll drop her home but I have to go out afterwards.'

'Tonight?' asked Julia. 'In this weather? Are you mad?'

'No, I just have to go out afterwards, that's all.' This was the third time I'd said this. For some reason I liked the sound of it, even though it made me feel like I was telling whoppers. 'I told Bill Dempsey that I'd meet him for a drink later on. You're not going to believe this but he's drifting slowly into an affair with some temp.'

'You're joking me. When did all this start?'

'A couple of weeks ago, it seems,' I told her. 'She's been working at his office and according to him she's been giving him the glad-eye since day one and now it looks as if there's been some funny business to boot.'

Julia stared at me for a moment, blinked, and shook her head in a tired gesture. 'Why are you talking like someone out of an old Cary Grant movie?' she asked me. 'Do you think it makes you sound suave and sophisticated?'

'I wasn't aware that I was,' I said, although reviewing my last phrase in my mind did give me cause to wonder. 'Perhaps it's all those Christmas movies I've been watching recently. I'll be bursting into song next and dancing down the street with an umbrella in my hand.'

'Does Jennifer know any of this?'

'Any of what?'

'About Bill and his temp? I presume she knows nothing. The wife is always the last to know.'

This is not necessarily the case. Elaine tells me that one way or another, the wife always knows, she's just the last to be told. There's a subtle difference there, according to Elaine.

'Well of course she doesn't know,' I said. 'He's hardly going to mention in passing that he's having an affair, is he? And you're not to tell her, do you hear? Bill told me what he told me in the strictest of confidence and if he was to find out that I've told you, then I'd never hear any more juice.'

'But Jennifer's my friend.'

'She says that your new haircut makes you look like Bette Davis.'

'That bitch. Bill was always too good for her. Let's have the temp to dinner some evening.'

I smiled and had another sip of my whiskey.

I first met Julia when I was nineteen and studying mathematics, my first great love, at Galway University. I got a kick out of numbers back then that some may have considered a little unhealthy. Even now when someone asks me to calculate percentages for them, I grow giddy and excited. I look up enthusiastically whenever the topical news programmes mention the word 'integration'.

Julia was studying for her Ph.D. at the time and one of her chores involved supervising six students – of which I was one – studying for their primary degrees. She never gave me a second look until the day I made a momentous decision, the best of my life, and cut my long black hair short, bleached it blonde, and revolutionised my life. I'm not a vain person but I'd never been happy with my

hair and the day I changed it, the day I finally got a decent haircut, I saw a whole new world open up for me. It gave me cheekbones and sat so much better with my natural colouring than the hair I'd been stuck with for nineteen long years. I'd look at myself in the mirror and think, well you're alright really, aren't you? I'd lean in close, toss it around a bit, play with it between my fingers, marvel at the sparkle that the light lent it and think, well I wouldn't mind a piece of me. If I was a girl. I'm not trying to sound egotistical, I just mean I could quite fancy myself. Under different circumstances.

We hit it off from that very moment, Julia and I. I saw the way she looked at me the day I emerged from my dark chrysalis into the world of the blonde and I enjoyed the attention. Her eyes lingered over my trim little body despite the fact that it hadn't changed at all. I liked feeling good about myself and knowing that strangers on the street noticed me the way I had often noticed them. I spent more time in the open air than ever before and my colouring improved. I stopped taking buses and walked everywhere, even into college every day, which was a three mile walk as I lived on Salthill Strand. I only regretted that I hadn't done it the day I hit puberty, although my parents probably would have objected if I had. My father believes that I should do nothing at all with my life outside of Work and Earn Money and Put Something Aside Every Week For My Pension and anything which impinges on this is bad news to him, even a haircut. Even now he scolds me when he hears that I've had a late night in the pub or sat in bed until 3 a.m. finishing a book.

'You've got work in the morning,' he tells me as if the fact of my being there, being at work, in work, working, is the only justification for living. He even objects when I work late because I've got work in the morning. He is sixty-eight years old and has never gone bald, despite the fact that his father and all five of his brothers did/have. His hair is grey.

The age difference didn't matter to Julia and I. At twenty-three, she was only four years older than I was, but I'd had six lovers to date as compared to her two so it seemed like it all worked out evenly in the end. The thing I liked most about her was her own long blonde hair which she was always tossing from one side of her head to the other. If you stood too close, you were likely to get hit by it, so I often stood close.

We went out with each other for about three years and then we got married. Friend arrived six months later. Followed closely by the twins, young Mark, and the triplets. Julia worked at the university while I got a job in the planetarium, observing changes in the stars. I'd drifted towards the stars after falling out with the sums and I'm here to tell you that it was the second best decision I ever made. It's a peaceful job but I can't begin to tell you how challenging and exciting it is. You never know what you're going to see when you look through your telescope. One day I thought I saw a comet hurtling towards me, ready to annihilate the whole world. I felt a chill burst out all over my body and wondered whether the relationships in my life were honest ones and true, and whether I'd have some difficult questions to address in heaven shortly. I alerted my colleagues and they all rushed to train the lesser telescopes on the phenomenon. There was screaming and shouting and an awful lot of running around. Doctor Elliot Marsh (Ph.D., Oxon.) rushed over to Doctor Marshall Ellis (Ph.D.) - a handsome man, I have to admit - and planted a smacker on his lips, pulled back and said 'I have always loved you.'

As things turned out it wasn't a comet at all, it was something completely harmless, but nevertheless it was an exciting couple of hours before we figured that out, although Elliot has never quite forgiven me my blunder. And we have days like that all the time.

Julia introduces me to people as an astronomer, but that's not actually true. I'm an astronomical assistant. But if Professor Colt retires or dies before his time, or if he should become the victim of an unforeseen and tragic accident involving a nail gun for example, or a Fiat Uno, then I'm in a prime position to take over the planetarium, in which case I will officially be the astronomer. Until then though, it's only really a little white lie.

'The thing about Bill Dempsey is that he thinks he's God's gift to women,' said Julia, pouring herself another scotch, possibly her third in fifteen minutes. 'And the tragedy of it is that he might very well be.'

'You've got to be kidding me.'

'Not at all. If I was ever to cheat on you, it'd be someone exactly like Bill Dempsey that I'd cheat on you with. I'd shag him in a heartbeat. I would sur-r-r-r-r-ender myself to him with a gasp.' She rolled her 'r' in surrender.

'For heaven's sake, the man's forty-three years old, he's overweight, balding and he smells like tomato soup. Why on earth would you want to condemn your soul into eternal damnation over a fellow like him?'

'There's something about him,' said Julia mysteriously. 'Something I can never quite put my finger on but something that tells me that he just might be someone rather interesting.'

'I'm someone rather interesting, Julia,' I tell her. 'That's why you married me, remember?'

'I married you because you got me up the duff, Christopher, that's why,' she said, smiling at me. 'Of course I probably would have married you anyway, but it did rather speed things up a bit, didn't it? Be honest now.'

'I suppose so.'

'And I married you because I loved you.'

She must be drunk.

I first met Elaine at a party in Professor Colt's house. I was on my own because the triplets were all down with the mumps and Julia insisted on staying home with them. She insisted on my staying home with them too but I declined the generous offer of sitting there all night with three screaming one year-olds when I could go for a couple of drinks and talk office politics, my favourite kind. It's the same old story in the planetarium as in any other job. You meet, you try to get along, you realise you can't get along, you believe that your colleagues have some serious psychological flaws, you consider yourself to be the only sane member of a gang of lunatics, you smile frigidly at each other when you pass on the stairs, you speak in tones of reverent politeness which masks your inner contempt, you realise it's all a big sham and wake up to the real world where it's easier just to ignore each other instead. It's not all glamour, you know.

'I shouldn't even sleep here,' I told Julia. 'I should go to a hotel. I've never had mumps and do you know how dangerous it can be for a man my age?'

'Could it kill you?' she asked sweetly.

'Worse. It could make me impotent.'

'Are you telling me that you wouldn't risk impotence in order to stay home and comfort three of your children in their collective hours of need? Is that what you're saying?'

'Yes,' I said simply. 'Now you've got it. Well done.'

Elaine came up to me at Professor Colt's party and asked whether I was the young man she'd been hearing so much about recently.

'It depends,' I told her. 'What have you heard?'

'Only that you've been developing a new theory about gaseous explosions and their relationship to the rings of Saturn. It's all Professor Colt's been talking about recently. He says you're quite the future of astronomical science in this country. He says there isn't a single person in the planetarium who can hold a candle to you.'

'No that's not me, actually, that's Doctor Jonathan Empsen,' I said. 'He's the one who's interested in gas. That's him over there in the corner. On his own.'

'Oh,' said Elaine, looking at him and finding him clearly disappointing. (He has mousy brown hair, a fringe and ridiculous sideburns that make him look like a Puritan farmer, whose wife, Goodie Empsen, is a witch.) 'That's a pity. But you're all alone too. Why is that?'

'The mumps,' I told her.

She took a step back. 'You have the mumps?' she asked.

'No, but three of my children do. My wife's at home nursing them.'

'Three of your children?' she asked me. 'How many have you got?'

'Six,' I replied. 'No, hold on, sorry, seven. Somehow I always forget little Mark. Poor child. I left him in a Texaco restroom once and drove home without him. It took Julia, my wife, to remind me of his existence when I got home. She's never let me forget it. Nor has her mother, for that matter. They use it as evidence of my lack of maturity.'

'I like your hair,' she said, brushing the fact of my real life over her shoulder like spilled salt.

'Thank you,' I said, pleased and smug as ever.

'It reminds me of someone,' she said, her finger tapping at her cherry lips as she thought about it. 'Who is it? Who do you look like?'

'I don't know. Just myself, I suppose.' I know exactly who I look like, the same two or three names come up all the time, but it's no good if you prompt someone. They have to come up with the goods themselves or it doesn't count.

'You don't look like an astronomer anyway,' said Elaine and I noticed now how attractive she was. Her eyes were unusually green and her dress was unusually spare. 'But you are one though, aren't you? You are an astronomer?'

I thought about it for a moment. 'Yes,' I replied. 'Yes I am.'

'I love astronomers,' said Elaine.

When Julia and I were dating she wouldn't let me put my arm around her in public or make any outward shows of affection. She claimed that we weren't a freak show and that if people wanted to see a couple of gorillas mating they could either go to the zoo or watch a nature programme on the BBC. It was a rule that she stuck to rigidly, especially when we were out with our friends, fellow students or the odd sibling. I made the mistake of double-dating with my best friend Jason Hickson one Valentine's Day.

We went to a special drive-in movie just outside Westport to watch a re-run of Richard Gere and Debra Winger in *An Officer And A Gentleman* on the big screen. Jason and Marian Wilder - who looked a little like Debra Winger actually with her shoulder length curly brown hair and her tight tops which left nothing to the imagination, not to mention that husky voice that makes Debra Winger such a goddess - were practically having sex in the back seat and rather than either leaving the car or making out ourselves, Julia took a copy of *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood out of her bag and started to read it. I played X's and O's with myself in the steamed up windows.

The only time she ever broke from this public passion prohibition was when we went to her parents' house to announce our engagement. Then she wanted me to practically impregnate her on the settee. She wanted them to see how much in love we were so that they wouldn't give us any grief.

'You'll be old like me someday,' said her father, who took an instant dislike to me because he, unlike absolutely everyone else in the world including the prime minister, doesn't like my hair. Julia says he thinks it's 'silly', which is strong language I know. 'It'll all fall out, you mark my words. One of these days you'll wake up and there won't be just dandruff on your pillow.'

'Christopher doesn't have that kind of hair,' said Julia. 'It won't fall out. It's too thick for that.' She rubbed her hand around my temples, her fingers cracking through a barrier of dried gel, which was a look that I favoured at the time.

'And I don't have dandruff,' I insisted.

'Sometimes I feel like a Mercedes Benz,' Julia's father said then. 'I've gone from nought to sixty in the blink of an eye.'

'Mrs Next-Door's on her own again,' said Julia's mother to Julia. Then, whispering: 'He's upped and offed with another w-o-m-a-n.' Spelled and whispered.

'When I was a boy, there was no such a thing as sliced bread,' said Julia's father. 'That was the best thing ever invented.'

'She hasn't washed her hair in weeks,' said Julia's mother.

'Some say Picasso was Spanish, but I know better,' said Julia's father. 'I know for a fact that he was of Eastern European descent and dabbled in the mystic arts.'

'You could grow potatoes in it,' said Julia's mother.

Julia clutched my arm and wrapped it around herself until my hand was practically groping her left breast and I welcomed the security blanket. I leaned closer to smell her hair and knew immediately why I was marrying this woman.

Elaine's a sexy girl. Men look at her when she walks down the street or into a room. Eyes follow her to her seat when we enter a restaurant. Women glance at her in shops and their lips purse indignantly at her simple sense of style and the ease with which she carries her beauty. I know for a fact that her confirmed homosexual friend Martin has a huge crush on her because I've seen him look at her sometimes in pubs, when his eyes grow heavy and he sighs and wonders whether the old just-hasn't-met-the-right-woman-yet cliché could perhaps have a grain of truth in it, and it could be, and he just might have. For a long time she had a sort of Princess Diana-style blonde wave which seemed to fall naturally into place after a shower, but she's recently cut down on the highlights and grown it a little longer around her neck. She now looks like a woman of thirty, as opposed to the mid-twenty year old I

fell in love with. And the thing is, this woman was born to look thirty. Even when she's sixty, she'll only look about thirty and she'll inspire the same passions of love and hate in others that she does now.

I like the fact that when I put my hand around the back of her head to pull her close and kiss her, I can run my hand through her hair where previously, there was just skin.

I asked her once what she was doing with me, or at least what she thought she was doing with me, which seemed more relevant somehow.

'The dirty,' she said.

'Doesn't it matter to you that I'm married?'

'If it doesn't matter to you, then it's hardly going to matter to me, now is it?'

'What about my kids?'

'I have no interest in parenting,' she told me. 'I don't want to meet them. Don't introduce us. It'd never work out. You know, it's just occurred to me, you're very fertile. They could market you.'

'You could grow potatoes in me,' I agreed.

'Don't make me pregnant whatever you do,' she said. 'Or I'll have your life.'

Julia and I have an understanding. I don't touch her on a school night and she agrees not to get pregnant at the weekends. In this way, we are preventing our eighth little bundle of joy from entering our lives.

'How come you never ask me when I'm going to leave my wife and children for you?' I asked Elaine, three hours after I'd picked up Friend, dropped her home and gone over to her house for some smashing sex. 'In the movies, women always ask those questions.'

'In the movies, women are stupid,' she said. 'In the movies, women wear make-up to bed and always have orgasms.'

'You always have orgasms,' I pointed out.

'Of course I do, darling,' she said.

'Seriously, Elaine. How come you never ask me?'

'Do you really want me to want you to leave your wife and children for me?'

'Oh good God, no,' I said. 'But I want you to want to ask me. It would make me feel needed.'

She thought about it. 'You want me to think about asking you whether you'll leave your wife and children for me but you don't want me to actually ask you out loud, just so you'll be happy and I'll be miserable. Is that it?'

'More or less.'

She sighed. 'Men...' she whispered. 'Alright then. How do you know that I don't? How do you know that I'm not spending my every waking moment wishing that you would leave Julia and the menagerie, and move in here with me instead?'

Now it was my turn to think about it. 'That's a good point,' I said. 'Right. That's fine, then.'

There was a long pause as we both sat and thought about this, me feeling increasingly self-satisfied, her feeling increasingly uncomfortable. 'I don't ever think it though, you understand,' she said

after a moment. 'I wouldn't want you to get that idea. I don't want you to do any of those things. I like things just as they are.'

'That's right,' I said, nodding my head sagely. 'That's the right thing to say.'

'But I really don't.'

'Excellent.'

'Listen to me, you freak, I don't. I don't think it and I don't want it.'

'Of course you don't.'

'Oh for Christ's sake.'

Julia's a smashing woman and I'm delighted I married her. She has a lovely way with the children and is always polite to my mother, bringing her a fruit loaf every time she has one of her falls, which are becoming increasingly frequent. (She drinks, you see.)

'We should put mattresses in that house,' says Julia. 'Instead of floorboards. Just install a gaggle of mattresses. Is that the collective noun? Gaggle? We'd save a fortune in hips.'

Sometimes we talk about affairs and Julia asks me probing questions until I feel like a Woody Allen character in a Woody Allen movie.

'Have you ever cheated on me?' she asked me last Tuesday night.

'Well,' I answered. 'Three weeks after we started going out I kissed Emma Bradley in the library between Henry James and Ben Jonson.'

'Really? And what happened?'

'Nothing much. An entire Freshman class poured in looking for a copy of *Bartholomew Fair* and we had to stop, which was just as well really, because she was doing this weird biting hard on the tip of my tongue thing that wasn't at all sexy, it was just painful.'

'And that's the only time?'

'The only time,' I said.

'Well I've never kissed anyone else since the day I met you,' she said. 'Although if Grant from *EastEnders* was to walk in here right now and offer to take me away, I'd never look back.'

'Here we go,' I said, sighing. I'd heard her Grant from *EastEnders* fantasies before. She'd once called his name out when we were making love. 'Grant from *EastEnders*!' she'd roared, throwing her head around in the air, her hair like a lasso ready to rope me in as she pushed her hand firmly down on my face until I could feel the springs beneath my back aching to break through and stab me. 'Grant from *EastEnders*!' Then, I'd stopped what I was doing, put off by the fact that she was fantasising about someone else while making love to me - outraged by it, particularly since he doesn't have any hair at all - and stared up at her with my mouth wide open while she simply grinned back and said: 'You 'eard.'

'But other than him, there's no one that could take you away from me.'

'Hurray!' I cheered.

I'm convinced that Elaine is seeing another man and I have a horrible feeling that he's a mathematician which, if you recall, was my original passion. They get in everywhere, those calculus Casanovas. They have no conscience and steal other men's mistresses with an abandon only possible

from those who really understand the concept of 'infinity'. Small hard backed copies of books about age-old theorems have been piling up on her bedside table where previously there had only been a copy of *A Man Without Qualities* and a volume of poetry by AA Milne.

'Numbers make me hot,' she said recently, which I suspect is the first time that line has been delivered since nine months before the birth of Pythagoras' last child.

'Why the sudden interest in sums?' I asked her and she blushed. Blushed, I tells ya!

'You should know. You're the astronomer.'

I blinked. 'Well that makes no sense,' I said clearly.

'Don't look for meanings in everything, Christopher. It's just an interest. Something to keep my mind active.'

'Why do you need to keep your mind active? What's wrong with it?'

'Nothing. I just saw it on Oprah that I should keep my mind active. So that's what I'm doing. Keeping my mind active.'

'You're seeing a mathematician, aren't you?' I challenged her. 'I know what they're like. All trousers and no morals. Admit it. You're seeing a mathematician. I can't believe you'd cheat on me. Jesus!'

'Christopher, you have a wife and seven children. You're hardly one to lecture me on morality.'

'Six children,' I corrected her.

'No,' she replied, her eyes widening. 'You have seven. You always forget little Mark.'

'Oh yes. My mistake.'

'I feel sorry for that child, I really do. You're putting money away in a college fund for the other six. You want to start putting money into a therapy fund for that poor boy.'

'Perhaps he can just learn all he needs from Oprah. Like you.'

'I never watch Oprah,' she said.

Julia's three months pregnant and I haven't touched her in four. And you don't have to be a mathematician to figure that one out. I can't believe she's lied to me and cheated on me. I feel... betrayed.

Here's the thing: Being blonde isn't a privilege. It's a responsibility.

I go to visit Julia in her parents' home where she is staying temporarily. I have calmed down. My temper has abated. I'm ready to talk. She's sitting on the settee beside her mother, who keeps one hand protectively on her daughter's knee throughout the meeting. Her father is sitting in an armchair, as am I. He looks quite chirpy.

'In my day, you couldn't get any contraception,' says Julia's mother eventually in an attempt at conversation. 'You heard stories about the things that went on in England of course, but even if we had access to the things you have today, we wouldn't have known what to do with any of it. That's why I don't understand you young people. Now that you have it, you don't use it.'

'Mother,' says Julia, her head bowed. 'Please...'

'I remember there was a boy who lived next door to me when I was a girl,' she continues. 'And he was famous for using cling film and an elastic band. But outside of him, there was no one else. And he died in a car crash so it didn't do him much good in the long run.'

'There's no religion anymore,' shouts Julia's father, staring at my hair like it's still physically repulsive to him, even now, even after all these years. As if I could put the rotting, maggot-infested corpse of a Persian cat on my head and he'd find it less offensive.

'Maybe we could talk alone,' I suggest.

'Why?' asks Julia's father. 'Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of them.' He nods over at his wife and daughter. 'There's no secrets here. Other than that business of what went on in the caravan in Pontyprid in the summer of '76, of course.'

'Maybe Julia and I could talk alone,' I suggest.

'You think I've cheated on you,' says Julia. 'You think this child isn't yours.'

'We haven't had sex in four months!' I roar. 'And yet you're three months pregnant!'

'You know how fertile you are,' she pleads.

'Not that fertile!'

'Stop looking at it like a mathematical equation. We must have done it. You've just forgotten, that's all.'

'What exactly is a diaphragm?' asks Julia's mother. 'And does it come with a diagram?'

'I'm sorry, I just don't believe you,' I say. 'How could I just forget? I've been obsessing about how long it's been anyway!'

'Christopher, you don't even know how many children you have already.'

'That's not true,' I say. 'I have... seven.' I smile. I am a smug man.

'You have eight,' she shouts. 'This one is yours too.'

'Oh, well I wasn't counting that one yet,' I point out. 'Be fair now.'

'I always wanted to fly on Concorde,' says Julia's father. 'I'll never get the chance now.'

'You can believe me or not believe me,' says Julia. 'It's your choice. But I'm telling the truth. I would never cheat on you. It's not in my nature. You know me. And you know that's the truth.' I think about it. I do know her. And I do know that's the truth. 'You've just forgotten, that's all,' she says quietly. 'But you've got to make a decision now on this, because I'm sorry, but I'm losing interest.'

I look across at her and notice the way she holds her hand against her still relatively flat stomach, as if she's afraid that someone might suddenly crash into her. I look at her and I see how protective she is. Of the baby. Of me. And she's right. A decision has to be made. And it occurs to me that I might not know whether she's been cheating on me or not, but I know one thing for sure: I've been cheating on her.

'My whole life changed the day I got a decent haircut,' I tell Elaine as I gather my few remaining items from her bathroom. Some razors, some shaving gel, some mousse, some shampoo, some conditioner, some hair nutrients, some combs, some gel, and a little hair wax for added hold. 'Julia fell for me because of my haircut and because of that we fell for each other and because of that, we had...'

I pause for a moment. 'A number of children. That's my life.'

'I never told you this,' says Elaine, sitting on the bed, her legs crossed tightly, her arms folded across her chest. 'But you're kidding yourself. It's your least attractive feature.'

'Let's not end this on a sour note,' I say, embarrassed that she would sink to such depths in order to either upset me or win me back. 'Let's at least be grown up about it.'

'I'm not saying it to hurt you,' she continues. 'You have many attractive features, you're perfectly acceptable in bed, you have a great sense of humour, but I've never liked your hair. Never. I just knew how much it meant to you so I never said anything about it. Until now. But I'm saying it now. Your hair is your least attractive feature by far.'

I stare across at her, perplexed. She can't really mean it, can she?

'One last thing,' she says as I leave the apartment and hand her back my key. 'Don't ever come back here. Don't call me. Don't try to see me. I can move on after this but you've made your choice so don't ever come back, alright?'

I nod. I move to kiss her but she backs away and closes the door slowly in my face. As I turn the corner towards the stairwell, I see two teenagers backed up together in a corner, kissing, all over each other. They can't be more than sixteen years old. His head is shaved, with only a thin, dark stubble protruding from his slightly misshapen head and she wears a hat. I stand there for a moment in the otherwise empty hallway, looking at them, and take a rare moment for myself before heading home to Julia.

My roots are showing.