

## Hair

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### **Real tomboys have bowl cuts**

When I was little, I never thought a lot about my hair. I didn't go to school with long, sweet braids or barrettes or showing off my collection of scrunchies and ribbons. I have no memories of my mother doing my hair for school or brushing it as a gesture of affection. I just remember having it cut, like it was some nuisance that had to be gotten rid of. To this day, my mother says the reason I always had to get my hair cut was because I "didn't like washing it." I don't know if I believe that. Half the pictures of me before age 10 are me taking a bath. I spent hours and hours in the bathtub every night. I always pretended I was a mermaid. Mermaids have long hair.

In elementary school, though, it felt quite natural to have a hideous bowl cut. I was a tomboy, a real one. I climbed trees and dug in the mud for earthworms and caught toads and tadpoles to keep in jars as pets. I liked Legos and videogames and comics. I was the only girl in my class to go see Jurassic Park when it came out. I gave the first boy who ever told me he liked me a bloody nose on the playground. I was the only girl invited to all the boys' birthday parties. I was the last girl in my grade to buy her first bra. The idea of being feminine repulsed me. I

didn't like girls. They were snotty and gossipy and didn't like to play. They just sat around and talked at recess, usually about each other, and that was boring. I was busy pretending to be a pirate or running away from a dinosaur. In a strange, unaware way, I really believed I was a boy. Of course I knew I wasn't. But perhaps, I thought, it was negotiable. And to all the boys in my class, I was one of them, and to my mother, who had really wanted a son, perhaps I was really her son. And maybe that is why I didn't mind having short hair.

My first crush was on a girl I sat behind in second grade. I don't remember thinking it strange that I would have a crush on a girl because I was still quite sure I was not one. But I remember what I noticed about her first was her hair. She had beautiful, long, oat-colored waves. I thought she looked just like Sleeping Beauty in the Disney movie. She sat at the desk in front of me and all day in class I would just stare reverently at the back of her head.

The older I got, the boys who had been just as grossed out by girls as me were paying more and more attention to them. Eventually, I was the only girl that seemed to gross them out. This is when I decided to go and get my ears pierced. When my mom first took me to the mall to have it done, I was eight years old. I very clearly remember the piercer asking my mother, "He just wants one ear right?"

Once (both) ears were pierced, I was no longer constantly mistaken in public for a little boy. But it did not help at school. In fact, it merely culminated in a traumatic incident where the star-shaped stud sunk into my earlobe and my teacher had to yank it out through the back. This miniature operation was done in front of the class and involved a lot of blood and crying and humiliation. Needless to say, I did not have my ears pierced again for many years. And I once again looked like a boy. Even as junior high approached and I started to need to wear a bra and

had a body that was producing fertile eggs, real boys couldn't seem to tell the difference. They all liked Julie. Julie still had her cascades of wheat-colored princess hair.

### **There is more than one way to rape a girl**

At the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I was growing it out. My hair grew down to my shoulders and my mom let me get a perm. That was what the other girls in my class had. I decided that I wanted to be a girl because I really did like boys—you know, in the “like like” way—and boys liked girls who had long hair. That was just the way it was.

One day I was on the school bus going home. Because I went to a private school that didn't have its own transportation, I had to ride with the kids from the public middle schools. They liked to make fun of the parochial school kids. I was long past my tomboy bully phase, trying really hard to be a girl, getting perms and wearing skirts and nail polish. I was also going through a very distinctive leopard print phase. Everything I owned had to be leopard print because I thought it was fabulous. I'm not sure how the transition from dressing like Annie Hall to dressing like Fran Drescher happened, but it did. The public school kids loved to make fun of my big, fuzzy leopard print coat. I ignored them because I knew how cool I was. They were just jealous of my amazing and daring fashion sense.

On that afternoon on the bus, a couple of boys behind me were being exceptionally mean, teasing me and yanking on my perfect, chemically enhanced ringlets. They were all cackling about my coat. They wanted me to react, I knew it, but I just sat there and didn't say anything. I thought that if I ignored them, they would stop because that's the wisdom you are taught when you are a kid. This wisdom supposedly defines maturity. Now, at twenty four, I would turn around and pop them in the mouth. But the ten-year-old me chose the high road, and, naturally,

they didn't stop. They started pulling harder, trying to find the point where I would break and face them, screaming and crying. No, I would give them no such satisfaction. I didn't want the humiliation of looking weak or giving in. My scalp felt like it was on fire, but I just pretended to disappear while tears streamed quietly down my face. I was determined to not make a sound, no matter how bad it hurt. Then suddenly, my head snapped forward and all I felt was a tinge on the back of my head. I heard one of them say, "Oh my God!" And then they started laughing again. When that interminable bus ride finally ended, I walked off as if nothing had happened, not looking back at them once. I ran home. In the bathroom, I stood in front of the mirror, parted my crunchy mop and gaped at a bald spot the size of a silver dollar. Then I broke into hysterical sobs. I laid on the bathroom floor for hours, crying for my hair—for the piece of my pride, my femininity, my being—that had been ripped out of me.

### **Maybe hair, after all, is the canvas of a woman's soul**

The summer of my junior year was when I got my first car, a red Pontiac Sunbird. It was the summer the first boy ever asked me out. It was also the summer I started growing out my hair. I use to drive around in the country for hours with my sunroof open and my windows down. Once I got to experience the exhilaration of my hair whipping around my face, floating in the air around me, shimmering in the sunlight, I was addicted to having it. Hair was graceful; it was free. It represented confidence, the blossoming awareness of my sexuality and the more it grew the more I was growing up. I stopped cutting my hair after that.

A couple years after high school, I was working as a bartender at a strip club. This was my scandalous, politically in correct, secret college job. In a strip club, hair is very important.

Men like hair. It's primal. It equals health which equals fertility which equals sex. I always made the best tips when I bartended with my hair down. By then, it had grown to the middle of my back.

One afternoon on a slow shift, a new girl came to the bar and asked me for a starter drink. She looked very familiar. I puzzled over how I recognized her while I mixed her tequila sunrise. And then, when she addressed me by name, I realized it was Julie, the beautiful girl who had sat in front of me in second grade. I hadn't recognized her because she had cut off her long, flexuous locks and now had a disheveled, bleached bob. Her eyes, which were already blue, were now bluer with teal colored contacts and all of her delicate features were traced and exaggerated with dark, heavy makeup. She looked like someone trying to look the way she already did. She looked like someone who did not know she was already fair-haired, blue-eyed and doll faced—and very pretty. We began catching up with each other and I asked her how she had been. "Not so good," she said. And then she went on to tell me about the drug dealer husband whom she had left because he beat her in front of their child and about all the ways her life had fallen apart. I looked at her hair and thought about how mutilated it seemed. Why would someone destroy such a covetous feature? I wondered if hair was not the way women express their self-worth. I wondered if hair is not the way we liberate and punish ourselves.

I don't have a daughter, but I go to work every morning and help 19 teenage girls wake up, shower, dress themselves and comb their hair. Many of them were never taught how to do these things by their mothers. Some never washed or combed their hair at all before ending where I work. Part of my job is to help them learn these skills, but it reaches beyond hygienic necessity. Their relationship with their hair is a reminder of the absence of one with their mothers, a testament to the dysfunction and pain of their pasts. It shows the ways which their

desires were underestimated because of their disabilities and that they were robbed of their individuality. They want to be beautiful, too. They wanted a mother who would gently comb their hair in the mornings and send them off with ribbons and braids. So did I. Being a little harsh and impersonal can be necessary to my job, but any time they come up to me with a brush and a bottle of apple-scented hairspray and their treasure chest of sparkly, multicolored hair accessories, I cannot resist. I let them rest their head on my knees while I brush out all their tangles and gently weave and part and twist their hair into beautiful strands of womanhood. They hug me and excitedly ask to go to the bathroom so they can pose in front of the mirror. In the mirror, each finally sees themselves for what they are: women.

As women, hair is a life force, an extension of ourselves. It is our youth, our fertility, our beauty, our personality, our self esteem, and it's scattered all around us for anyone to see and touch and judge. It has to be protected, cared for and nurtured. Hair roots itself in our souls. It can break a little girl's spirit on a school bus—or it can make a girl a woman for the first time.