

Our Mother's Hair

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After my mother died last year, my three siblings and I spent time together, something that, as adults, we had never really done before. There's a big age gap between my siblings and me; they are ten, fourteen, and sixteen years older than me. My eldest sister left home when I was six months old. They were all married by the time I was nine. And the four of us live hundreds, in some cases thousands, of miles apart. British Columbia, Nova Scotia, England.

Despite the age difference, my siblings and I have a lot in common, and one of those things is our hair. We all have the same hair, and we got this hair from our mother. Wiry, coarse, very thick, both kinky and curly, but also straight, it's the kind of hair that tends to frizziness. It does not lend itself to anything resembling chic or soignée without intensive professional help and massive amounts of expensive haircare products.

My own hair started to go white when I was in my early twenties and was almost completely white by the time I was forty. This did not happen to my sisters who went grey at a more normal speed. My brother, on the other hand, is going the way of many men – including our father – losing hair off the top as he gets older.

About six weeks after my mother died, my siblings and I came together to empty her condo in preparation for its sale. My brother and I took up residence in my mother's place while my eldest sister stayed with my other sister who lived nearby. We spent long days emptying cupboards and shelves, deciding what to get rid of, dividing up what we wanted to keep.

We got on well. It was difficult but it was also cathartic, a process of examining my mother's life as represented by the stuff she left behind – not representative of her at all, of course, but nonetheless full of rich textures and memories as well as mysteries: the mysteries of our mother's life. The things about her that we never knew and now would never know.

One day I emerged from bed in the morning looking particularly gruesome with hideous jetlag compounded by six weeks of weeping and laughing hysterically – my siblings and I laughed a lot when we were together during that time, though we weren't really having fun. My brother was watching the news and eating cereal out of one of the two bowls that were now left in the almost empty kitchen.

'My hair looks awful,' I said. I didn't really expect my brother to reply, but he did.

'It does,' he said, nodding.

I sat down.

'You have that awful hair that we all have,' he said. 'It's wiry and spiky and usually looks like some kind of hedge, not like hair at all. Mum's hair.'

I was surprised by his vehemence. To tell the truth, I had expected him to say something more along the lines of ‘Oh no, you look terrific, you always look terrific.’

‘I was glad when I started losing my hair,’ he continued. ‘I didn’t have to deal with it any more. It was a relief.’

I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t imagine actually losing my hair; it was bad enough having gone grey when I was twenty-five.

Not long after the house sold, my sister who lived nearby started going to my mother’s hairdresser. My mother came from a generation who made regular trips to the hairdresser – a weekly wash and set and a fresh perm every couple of months. The first time my sister visited my mother’s hairdresser they both spent much of the appointment crying. However, my sister has kept going to our mother’s hairdresser and now, after a year, they are both almost used to it.

Last time she went, my sister told me, her hairdresser said, ‘You know, as long as you keep coming to see me, your mother will never be dead to me. You have her hair.’

And so our mother lives on for all of us, sometimes in unexpected ways.

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