

You Take All

by Kari Nguyen

Your mother's wig is a honey-red, a melting heat. You imagine your mother to be wearing her heart on her head. When the wig first appears, you run through the house, screaming, "It's *ALIVE!*" Later you ask if you can wear it. The response is always, "We'll see."

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Together you flip pages of yellowing cardstock. The odd, grainy photographs, pinned loosely by thin plastic sheets, unnerve you. "Grandma wore this too," your mother says. You are unsure. The past, apparently, was a time without color. This makes it hard to tell.

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On the closet floor, you sit cross-legged and cut your own hair. You start with the bangs, then move to the rest, the long brown strands falling noiselessly into your lap. When you're done, you sneak out and pad down the hall to the bathroom, where you thrust your face at the mirror: your bangs much too short, the sides of your hair sad and jagged. You'll catch heat for this, you know, and for a minute you consider sliding into the tub and pulling the curtain to hide yourself altogether. Instead, you peek through the doorway, turning your head towards the sounds from the kitchen: the radio man's distant drone, the tink-tink of silver and glasses moving from dish rack to cupboard. Knowing your mother will be busy for the moment, at least, you scurry from the bathroom, retrieve the scissors from the closet floor, and hurry back to fix what you've started.

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You meet in the hallway; your mother looks upset. Your hair is better now, more even, and besides the back, it might even be considered school-acceptable. Your mother studies you for a moment before saying, "There's something different about you." She leans down, staring into your face. "I think you lost another tooth." And she grabs you and holds tight and there's nowhere else to go.

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Rummaging through the closet, you sort sweaters, scarves, and hats. You're an intruder in your own mother's home. "Do you want this?" your aunt asks. She has taken down a brown, square box from one of the shelves. The mass within is a fiery nest. You can't help but glance beyond the box to your aunt's chest: flat, mined. She took care of things before it was too late. "You should think about it, honey," she tells you. It's not clear if she's referring to the wig or the surgery. She takes the hairpiece from the box, turning it in her hands. "These bobs used to be so stylish."

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You stand in the mirror; your hands flit overhead. Your reflection is unfamiliar, your skin is awash. You close your eyes for a moment, hoping it might bring you back to yourself. Then you take a pen and line your eyes, feeling the tip pressing down into your flesh. You'll wear your heart on the outside too. You are the rituals of your women gone before.

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The wig is carefully propped as you walk down the street, balanced as you nod at the man on the sidewalk, and the man's thinking how you're too precious, with your sassy back and swing hips, red locks and lips, stick limbs and stone eyes. Too precious with your cut and color, nails filed, painted, and pointed ahead, at that, at that. And you're thinking if you demand it, it can't demand back. Take it, and you can't be taken. You'd say to the man you can't see it but it's under the wig the red wig this one here yeah the one you think is so sassy so sassy so cool is cancer, cancer, cancer. And you're hailing a cab and the cab pulls up and you tuck your dress beneath you as you slide across the seat and motion for the man to follow and he simply stands and stares until the door closes and the cab drives off, trailing embers. Light passes through, stops but a minute before moving ahead, bending around the curve.

(And a small girl, watching with her mother across the street,
longs to be red.)

