

toupee

by Lore Prior

It wasn't until about 2:30 that my hairpiece began mauling small children. I must have dozed off in the sun after finishing my second cigarillo, otherwise I'm sure I would have noticed the commotion.

"HOLY JESUS!"

"What in God's name was that??"

"Olivia!"

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None of this would have happened if my sister hadn't started throwing away my toupee a few weeks ago. She was in the kitchen washing the breakfast dishes when I first confronted her.

"Where the hell did you put it?"

She pretended not to hear me as she scoured a saucepan.

"You know you have to use cooking oil when you make eggs, Colin. You always overcook them, and then I spend all morning trying to scrape the remainder off the bottom of the pan."

"Where did you put it?"

"Put what?"

"You know what, Charlotte."

I can never bring myself to say the word "toupee". It's just too painful.

Charlotte took her hands out of the dishwater and looked at me, shaking her head.

"You can't honestly think it makes you look better."

"I don't need this right now. I'm late for work, just tell me where it is."

"It doesn't even match your normal hair color! Everyone knows it's not real- it just looks like a piece of old carpet draped over your head."

"I don't care, Charlotte. I need it. Would you just give it to me?"

Sighing dramatically and rolling her good eye in every direction, she slumped out of the kitchen, gesturing for me to follow her to the side of the house, where we kept the dustbins.

"You wouldn't!"

But there it was, buried beneath a pile of coffee grounds and banana peels, looking like a sad dead animal. I ran it under the shower head until it was wearable again, and my sister refused to look at me as I left for work.

When you start balding, you like to pretend it's not happening. You are of course completely aware of the whole process. You notice that parts of your scalp are getting hot or cold faster than others, you feel the breeze more... but you pretend you don't. Every time someone's eyes flick to the thinning area, you notice. But you pretend you don't. Receding hairlines run in my father's side of the family. Whenever there was a family gathering, the balding men would group together like sad flamingos and watch the crowd, eyes lingering on the occasional thick, luscious head of hair of a passing male in-law. They would cover their own barren terrain creatively, with baseball caps, bowler hats, and even the occasional feathered fedora. And of course, when I spontaneously became a Calgary Flames fan, they knew hockey was not my priority.

"Colin," they would say, tapping the brim of my cap and then touching their own covered heads, "We know. We know what you're going through. WE KNOW. We have to stick together, us Cook men. Stick together or bald alone." They would always end on a cackle, slapping me on the back or shaking my shoulder encouragingly. At weddings or reunions, after a few drinks, they would take off their hats as a single unit and bask with whiskeys around a table, the artificial light glinting off their hairless scalps. It was unsightly, like being a tourist at an all-male nude beach in Europe. Being a modest man, I saw hairpieces as the more practical route.

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"You working here holds this sort of unspoken irony, you know..."

Teresa, Quebecian destroyer of souls, sat in a high wooden chair next to the stall, eyeing the top of my head over an issue of *Ghost World*. Her hair was, as usual, adorned beyond necessity with Dr. Sleek's 100% Horse Hair Glamour Extensions and Accesorizers. Auburn, Honey Blonde, and Roan were braided into her mousy plait

at random, so that her head looked like some strange cornucopia of colorful filaments.

"It's not unspoken irony if you mention it more than twice a day."

She frowned slightly, then spotted a large crowd of fashionable women that were strolling past.

"Ladies! LADIES! We have today a one-time-only deal! Today and today only we are having a fantastic sale! Buy two Dr. Sleek's products, get the third free! These are twenty dollar value products, ladies, don't let this opportunity pass you by!"

A brunette woman in a black dress suit made the mistake of straggling behind of her friends, and Teresa reeled her in.

"Madam, may I have your attention for just one moment? How would you like to have lush, full hair in beautiful colors, no dyeing necessary, all in under three minutes? I think you would look fantastic with just a touch of Quicksilver Blonde in your hair, I think it would accent your face perfectly."

She pulled an iridescent scrunchie of hair from out of nowhere and began to position it around the woman's face, showing her the result in a small hand-mirror.

"Now these are 100% horse hair made from the finest pure-bred horses, no mistreatment was involved, you will not find a better product anywhere else, I guarantee it."

The woman caught my reflection in the mirror, and her eyes raised.

"*That's* not one of your products, is it?"

Teresa scowled at me.

"Of course not! Please excuse him, he's new here."

As the woman hurried away, Teresa turned to me, her eyes ablaze.

"I need to fill my quota for the end of the month if I'm going to get that raise. You've only been here a week, and you're already scaring away customers. Would you please take your break and go to the men's room, Colin? Your "hair" is looking seriously terrible today."

"I can do that. Do you want anything from the food court?"

"Yeah. Get me one of those hot pretzels with mustard and a Diet Coke."

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"I just don't understand."

The officer's uniform was slate grey. His shoes had white scuff marks on them, and he was tapping his fingers impatiently on the desk that separated us.

"How could you not have noticed that you had a living animal on top of your head for an entire day?"

"I don't know. I'm... sorry. I just... I suppose I was very tired this morning, and I normally just get the thing out of the trash and put it on. I guess I don't really pay a lot of attention to how it looks anymore. But I swear to God it didn't feel like an animal."

The man stopped taking notes for a moment.

"What do you mean you get it out of the trash?"

Charlotte, who was seated next to me, burst into tears. Her lazy eye roamed wildly around the room as her shoulders shook

"It's all my fault! My fault! I d-didn't want him wearing it anymore... I didn't think something like this would happen. I'm so sorry!"

There was a knock on the door, and a man in a light blue collared shirt entered and spoke to the police officer in a low voice. He then sat in another chair opposite me and looked me in the eye.

"Were you aware that in addition to being the reason two small children are in critical condition right now, you seriously jeopardized the welfare of a Gulo gulo, or North Canadian Wolverine, which is endangered in this part of the country?"

"What? A wolverine?!"

"Yes, a young one. Luckily we were able to sedate it for long enough to take it into temporary captivity. If it had been injured or killed, you would be in a lot more serious trouble than you are now."

"But I've never even seen a wolverine!"

"BULLSHIT!"

My sister began to sob harder.

"The Gulo gulo is no longer native to this part of the continent. A kit would not have been digging through your trash, if you maintain

your story. It just does not happen. Wolverines stick to the mountains, they have no reason to be in a suburban area!"

"Is there no way one could have found its way here?"

The wildlife agent thought for a moment, his brow still furrowed and furious.

"Eagles and other large birds of prey have been known to overpower a kit and carry it somewhere to eat it, but we're talking hundreds of miles. There's no way it would have held on to it for this entire distance."

"I'm sorry, I know it sounds ridiculous, but I just can't think what else could have happened."

At this point, the police officer cleared his throat loudly.

"So we're supposed to believe that an eagle carried a small wolverine over a hundred miles, only to drop it into your outside dustbin, where it remained unconscious for almost a day, during which time you picked it up, placed it on your head, and wore it for seven hours, never once realizing that it was not actually a toupee but an endangered breed of vicious wild animal? And that it simply yawned, stretched its little legs on top of your scalp, and scampered off to bite off a little boy's fingers and mangle a little girl's face without you being any the wiser?"

"I'm a heavy napper! I KNOW it sounds absurd, but I honestly don't know what else could have happened!"

This policeman was hairy, and he seemed to be emphasizing it more in my presence. He had thick, wavy, European locks all over his head. He had sculpted it into a handlebar moustache on his upper lip, and it peeked up through his collar in curly ringlets. In front of him, under the bright light of the interrogation room, my scalp burned and reflected. My hairpiece was currently being forcibly restrained by Animal Control. The officer muttered something to the Wildlife Agent, and the latter left the room. Then he turned to me again, and began to speak very softly and calmly.

"Here's what's going to happen. I know you're lying to me. You're trying to put me on. I don't for the life of me know why you couldn't come up with a better story, but here we are nonetheless. I don't

know why you did it. Maybe you're a sadistic fuck, maybe you're just an idiot and didn't think a brutal beast like that would harm anyone. But it's still a crime, the injuries caused are your fault and yours alone, and I'm gonna personally make sure you're incarcerated for a long, long time."

Charlotte fainted onto the desk.

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"Mr. Cook, Mr. Cook, can we get a statement please?"

"Mr. Cook, what were you thinking when you let that animal loose?"

"MR. COOK! Do you still stick to your story, that you thought the wolverine was a man's hairpiece?"

I peeked out from under the black sweatshirt my lawyer had covering my head as I was pulled through the sea of flashing cameras and scribbling reporters. The last questioner was a thin blonde woman with bright red lipstick that matched the polish on her nails. I began, "Yes-", but my lawyer covered my face again, pulling me into a car.

"No questions please!"

"MR. COOK!" Those red claws scrabbled at the window, and a microphone was shoved in my face.

"Have you ever thought about adopting a comb-over?"

