

Ever. Happily. After.

by Roxane Gay

This is a fairy tale. There is a princess who is not a princess but we will call her a princess because every fairy tale has a princess. Her name is Tanya. She's the daughter of a mechanic and a housewife. She has two brothers and two sisters. She is the middle child. She works at the JC Penney's hair salon. She has a pretty face, she is often told because she is pretty face fat, which is not to be confused with Discovery Channel fat, but she is large enough she can't buy clothes at Old Navy. Tanya is not unhappy. She stands on her feet for eight, nine, ten hours a day listening to old women gum their way through their sentences because they left their dentures at home. She rolls their thin white hair with tiny rollers even though she thinks putting a perm in someone's hair is a crime, a real fucking crime. Still. There's not much she can do about it. Old women want what old women want, and at the JC Penney's hair salon, they want their hair tightly coiled to their dry scalps so when they wake up after falling asleep in the oversized chairs in their living rooms, their hair still looks freshly done. Other women come to the salon too. They come to get their nails done or to get cheap A-line hair cuts or blow outs and it makes them feel, for an hour or two, like they're not in a small town at the end of the world, which is the edge of Northern Michigan. The salon is brightly lit with shiny faux-marble floors and mirrors lining three walls and in the middle, rows of sinks abutted by hair dryers. There's something fantastic about the lighting in the JC Penney's salon—no matter what her physical flaws, the warm lights and the reflective surfaces make a woman glow and look like the most beautiful woman in the world.

This is a fairy tale. There is a prince who is not a prince but we will call him a prince because every fairy tale has a prince. His name is Elmer. He's the son of a drunk and a coward but it could have been worse. That's what Elmer tells himself when he thinks about his life. He works at Applebee's and he loves his job. He tells himself

that too because the work is steady and there's free food to be had and because he has a small weed habit and his dealer lets Elmer pay for product with Applebee's gift cards. The dealer, whose name is Tommy Tommy though no one knows why, loves Applebee's because he sees the restaurant for what it is—a place where you can have microwave-prepared food brought to you. Tommy Tommy recognizes the hustle and he appreciates it. Elmer also loves his job because every time a member of the wait staff leaves the kitchen, they have to say, “walking out.” Elmer amuses himself by saying “walking out” in a different voice or intonation each time. This habit does not endear Elmer to his coworkers. Elmer has long hair. It is long and thick, hangs well past his shoulders. He is very proud of his hair. It makes him feel like an outlaw, especially when he's biking to work on his ten-speed. When Elmer was in high school, he dated a girl named Cindy Daavettilla and she always tasted like mouthwash and even though she wouldn't have sex with Elmer or even give him any head, she did brush his hair every afternoon after school. As she brushed his hair and worked product through the long locks she said, “No matter what happens between us, promise me you'll never cut your hair.” Elmer's heart pounded fiercely when Cindy said such things and the hairs on his arms stood on end. Her words sounded a lot like love so he promised and even after they broke up only seven weeks after they started dating, he continued to keep his word. Now, nine years later, Elmer's hair is so long the weight of it makes his neck hurt, but he remembers Cindy sitting on the edge of his bed, his head in her lap, her skinny knees pressing against his shoulders. The memory of it makes the pain go away.

Elmer keeps his word until the day Cindy Daavettilla comes into Applebee's and takes a seat at one of his tables and she sits across from a thick asshole who was on the ski team in high school and only did well because the sheer mass of his body helped him hurtle down mountains at unnatural speeds. Cindy's belly is swollen and covered in a baby blue t-shirt that reads BREEDER in large block letters across her protruding navel. Elmer hands them their menus and the

clear plastic tumblers filled with water. He takes their drink orders and recites the daily specials. He stands, shifting from foot to foot while Cindy and the asshole banter back and forth about what they want to eat, should eat, shouldn't eat, can't eat. Elmer listens and he thinks, "Look at me, Cindy. Just look up." He is grateful he thought to wash his hair that morning. Cindy looks up but she still doesn't look at him. She fingers the edges of the menu. She says, "I want one of everything," then she rubs her belly and smiles at the asshole across from her, and then she says, "but I'll take a side salad and a cheeseburger and fries and mozzarella sticks." Elmer carefully writes her order in his notepad. His penmanship is perfect. He asks how she wants her burger prepared even though the only way you can get a burger at Applebee's is well done. He asks Cindy what kind of dressing she wants. He asks her husband, he can see the thin gold band on the man's thick fingers, what he wants and carefully takes down his order too. Elmer knows he should walk away, should walk to the station and enter the order and see to his other tables but instead he says, "It's nice to see you, Cindy. I never did cut my hair." She looks at him again, blinks, says, "Do I know you?" Elmer blushes and he's angry because guys don't blush but here he is, the heat crawling up his neck and there's nothing he can do about it. "It's me," he says. "Elmer Koski. We went to high school. We used to date." Cindy Daavettila smiles politely, pretends to remember and Elmer can see she's pretending and it's a terrible moment. Elmer wants to vomit. He can feel the hot acid on his tongue but he won't give her the satisfaction, so he swallows, hard. He wants to slam his fist into Cindy's face. His neck is killing him and all he can feel is the unbearable weight of his ridiculous hair. His fingers are clenched into tight fists, the skin stretched taut. He imagines what Cindy's cheekbones would feel like cracking against his knuckle. He wonders if her skin would split open. He wonders if there would be blood.

Elmer nods curtly and he picks up the menus and he enters the happy couple's order and when their food is ready, he serves it and

refills their drinks. He brings them their check and makes change and they leave him a three-dollar tip. Elmer tells his manager he's not feeling well and his manager waves him off and tells Elmer to go home. Elmer gets on his ten-speed and bikes to the mall, which everyone calls the small because most of the retail spaces are empty save for JC Penney's, a sad costume shop, a local jeweler, and a GNC. He jumps off of his bike before coming to a full stop and lets it fall to the ground. He runs into Penney's and finds the salon in the back right corner. He sees Tanya standing in front of a tall glass-shelving unit where she's organizing hair care products. She's holding a clipboard in one hand and she's chewing on a pen that bobs up and down with each nibble. He taps her on the shoulder, says, "I need a hair cut." Tanya sets her clipboard down and leads Elmer to her station. She drapes him with a plastic cape and says, "How much do you want me to cut off?" She looks at him in the mirror and holds her fingers in the air, a few inches apart. Elmer feels hot tears edging from the corners of his eyes. He shuts them, tightly. "Take it all off," he says. Tanya shrugs. She washes Elmer's first, his hair practically filling the sink. She scratches his scalp vigorously with her long fingernails, then pulls her fingers through his wet hair. She wraps his head with a towel and tells him she'll be right back. Tanya goes to the alley behind the store and pulls out a pack of cigarettes that has been tucked in her bra. It is crumpled and warm but the cigarettes are still intact. As she smokes, she paces up and down the alley. Elmer's locker was across the hallway from hers and for four years she watched him watching Cindy Daavetilla. She loved Elmer because he was so busy watching Cindy he never bothered making fun of her. She loved his hair too—so thick and long and shiny. On the first day of beauty school, the instructor asked every student why they wanted to become a hairdresser. Tanya proudly shared the story of Elmer Koski's amazing hair and how it would be an honor to spend her life helping people try to grow hair like that. She heard the snickers around her. She saw the instructor rolling his eyes. She didn't care.

Tanya flicks her cigarette into a nearby dumpster and returns to the salon. Elmer is sitting with his face in his hands. She taps his shoulder again. "Sorry about that," she says. Elmer shrugs. As she cuts his hair, she asks him what he does for a living, makes small talk. Elmer doesn't want to be rude so he tries to do his part, providing Tanya with inconsequential responses. When she's done with the haircut and Elmer's beautiful hair lies in thick piles around her feet, she swivels Elmer around, points at his reflection in the mirror. "What do you think?" Elmer's eyes widen. He can hardly recognize himself but the best part is that he feels light and free and when a cool breeze dances across the back of his neck, his dick gets hard. Elmer forces a smile. "You did great," he says, reaching for his wallet. As she rings him up, Tanya finally says, "You don't remember me, do you?" Elmer shakes his head, takes the change Tanya hands him. "I'm sorry," he says. "I don't." Tanya bites her lower lip but a part of her is grateful he hasn't made the moment worse by pretending he remembers her and putting her in a position where she has to pretend she doesn't know he's pretending. "We went to school together," she says. Elmer offers Tanya a half smile and then he looks at her. He really looks at her and in the fantastic light of the JC Penney's salon, with cool, fresh air on the back of his neck, Elmer feels the tight leash around his heart loosening. "We should hang out some time," he says. Tanya blushes and stares at her perfectly manicured hands. She hands Elmer one of her cards, tries not to hope he'll call, and when he's gone, she licks the tips of her fingers that momentarily brushed against the soft palm of Elmer's hand.

This is a fairy tale. The prince and princess have to fall in love. After Elmer leaves, Tanya returns to her station and she carefully gathers every strand of Elmer's fallen hair. She puts his hair in an empty white gift box that she steals from the Customer Service counter, wraps it in tissue paper, also stolen, or at the very least, borrowed. When she goes home that night, she puts the box in the back of her closet where she keeps an outfit she wishes she could

wear, a copy of Judy Blume's *Forever* and a bag of Twizzlers because she likes to chew on licorice when she's nervous. Tanya doesn't want to hope Elmer will call so for the next week she goes to work, and goes to The Uphill for quarter beers with her friends and takes a walk along the lake with her mother and thinks about doing something different with her hair but then changes her mind because she wants to look exactly the way Elmer saw her when he came to the salon for a haircut. When Elmer finally does call, Tanya is at work, and she holds her hot phone against her ear while she rolls Greta Gershon's hair into a tight perm and she doesn't even mind because she's having an adult conversation with Elmer Koski. Elmer asks Tanya out and he takes her to Applebee's where they eat free food and then they go to The Uphill and they splurge on dollar wells and they play pool and watch people singing Karaoke and when they're drunk enough to no longer feel obligated to make good decisions, they jump on stage and sing Journey songs and Tanya thinks this is the happiest she could ever possibly be.

Tanya is not Cindy Daavettila. At first, that's a tough thing for Elmer to handle but they date and learn to hate each other just enough to love each other. Every night, Elmer brings Tanya food from Applebee's. He walks into their small apartment furnished with hand me downs from their parents, drops the Styrofoam container on the glass coffee table and tells her what he's brought while a constellation of condensation starts pooling beneath the food. He throws himself on the couch and grabs the remote control and changes the channel no matter what Tanya's watching. He puts his feet on the coffee table next to her food and the very sight of it always makes Tanya nauseous. She thinks of the Formica kitchen table his mother gave them and how much she loves that table and hopes the table will be enough to keep them together. When she threatens to leave him, Elmer reminds her of her one limitation, that she is not Cindy Daavettila. Tanya reminds Elmer he is not Prince Charming. She is frustrated by her happiness because she knows she should be miserable but she isn't. She is so happy she spends

the first hour or so after Elmer comes home each night yelling at him, recounting a detailed taxonomy of his failures. Tanya yells so loudly she wakes up most mornings with a sore throat. The louder she yells, the more her face reddens, the harder Elmer laughs. When they get bored with their arguments, they hold hands and watch movies and drink cheap beer.

When he's not at home, Elmer pretends he doesn't have a girlfriend. People ask about Tanya, and he says, "She's just a crazy bitch I live with." As he says the words, his chest tightens uncomfortably and a thin layer of sweat breaks out on his upper lip. When she's not at home Tanya pretends she doesn't have a boyfriend. The girls at the salon ask about Elmer, and she says, "He's just an asshole I live with." As she says the words, her cheeks burn brightly, and she stares at her feet and her breath catches in her throat and on break, she goes to hide in the GNC, staring at various supplements and vitamins while she calls Elmer. She says "I miss you," and he says, "I miss you too," and Elmer asks Tanya what she wants for dinner and she promises to massage his scalp when she gets home. They are not ashamed of each other but they want to keep what they have away from their friends and coworkers who would, inevitably, intrude. Before she hangs up, Tanya says, "I hate you," and Elmer says, "I fucking hate you too," and for the rest of the day, they both feel unbearably alive.

Elmer likes to sleep with Tanya's meaty arms wrapped around him, his head nestled against her perfect breasts. As lovers, Elmer and Tanya are sweet, passionate and generous. Elmer touches and kisses her everywhere, reveling in the way her soft flesh feels beneath his lips. He loves the give and take of her. She always smells good and clean and she touches him where no other girls ever would and sometimes, when he's inside of her, and he looks down at Tanya, with her eyes squeezed tightly shut, he wants nothing more than to cry and make himself ugly with the joy of the moment. Tanya loves Elmer's bony knees and bony elbows and his

tender kisses. She loves that he makes her feel full and shiny and that he always waits for her to come first like a real gentleman. If Elmer and Tanya never left their bed, if they made the whole wide world the soft sheets and seven pillows and antique quilt and the Motor Trends magazine tucked under Elmer's pillow and the teddy bear Tanya got when she was nine and the shallow valley on Elmer's side of the bed that always forces Tanya to roll toward him in the middle of the night, if that bed was all they ever knew, they would live ever after, quite happily.

