

SAMPSON GROWS HIS HAIR

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My parents weren't believers in faith, merely in luck. When the time came to name their children, they flipped to a page and pointed. My brother got Zephaniah, but he wears thick-rimmed glasses and tight pants and goes by Zeph, and the girls fall at his feet. My sister Lamentations is having a hard go of it. I'm trying to help her: I am growing out my hair, long and lush, to give to the right girl at the school dance this Friday. What a romance I will have then!

Have. Imagine. Whatever.

Zeph says that no one will ever love me as long as I live.

He says this kindly, even a little sadly. I have heard him and Lamentations discussing me behind closed doors, and every time, Zeph gets a spur in his throat like a cowboy is urging him onward. So he goes on. According to Zeph, I just don't understand: it's been well and good to look like a kid until now, but I'll be thirteen soon and I will have to make a change. My brother Zeph is a ladies' man, says my sister, and by cause or consequence he is overly attuned to the human body. This keeps him healthy when our family

is sick—for every bad trait a good one on its other side, says my sister.

"So what is on the other side of me?" I say.

This comment seems to spur Zeph in the throat. He makes that awful gurgling sound, swipes at his eyes behind his glasses, strums D-minor on the guitar he's been teaching himself to play since we left Pittsburgh.

"Your ass," says Lamentations.

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The reason that no one will ever love me as long as I live is that I have no, ahem, organs. This is how my sister tells it. The problem is—at the new doctor's office in the new town we have moved to (Cleveland, Ohio, this time)—that Sampson has no, ahem, organs. How will he have children when he has no, ahem, organs. Explain to him that he cannot have children since he has no, ahem, organs.

Of no consequence to Lamentations are my heart, liver, stomach, large intestines, small intestines, pancreas,

kidneys, and spleen. Of no consequence are the organs I have in excess of what is necessary: my appendix, gallbladder, tonsils. Of no consequence are the organs I have in excess of what is normal: my extra lung, my extra tooth. To Lamentations I have no, ahem, organs because I have nothing going on between my legs.

I have chosen to refuse surgery (constructive more than reconstructive) and therapy (hormone replacement, plus psycho-). Zeph believes this is because I do not trust medicine anymore, not after it failed to save my parents from the seas that swept their lungs when I was six months old. There I was beside them in the Philly hospital, too young to know that no one would ever love me as long as I lived, flooding them with worry. Does inability to treat pneumonia inspire confidence in the medical establishment? Certainly not, any idiot will tell you.

But that is not the reason.

The reason is something that I hide away in my heart because I am *not* just any idiot, and I know that when you expose a soft part of yourself to the elements, someone's foot will come to kick it. Witness: our old cat Tobit on her back, our new cat Paws biting her belly like a jelly doughnut. Witness: old Pittsburgh-school Sampson changing for the sixth-grade dance, old Pittsburgh-schoolmate Jack kneeling him in the nonexistent balls. Witness: new Cleveland-school Sampson *not* changing in front of anybody (not even for gym), new Cleveland-schoolmate Connor pounding him affably on the fist.

So.

I refuse surgery, and nobody can change my mind. Not Zeph with his cast of girlfriends rotating like a deli dessert case; not Lamentations with her list of self-made proverbs; not the memory of my parents that the two of them invoke, Dad in a red moustache and Mom in blown-out bangs, poking my armpits 'til I laugh.

I know my siblings are just worried. Zeph is nineteen and Lamentations thirty, and they're both trying in their different ways to take care of me. I know we moved, again, so I could start over. Again. My sister has read too many articles about bullied boys who become serial killers or kill themselves (or both), and my brother has said too many times that the parents should have moved the boys away. "At the first sign of trouble," Zeph says, stroking

his guitar's hips, like he wishes he had parents who would move him someplace else.

I hand over the flyers I amassed on my first Monday of school and tell my siblings that we can stay where we are this time. I tell them I am not angry, psychotic, or depressed. In fact, I am the opposite of those things. I am happy. I smile my most convincing smile.

"Not yet, you're not," says Lamentations.

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And now, yet again and too soon, I have to try to gut-punch dead the problem of my brother and sister's worry. I have watched them wince at the flyer I fished from the garbage and posted to our fridge—*Seventh-grade dance Friday!* reads the flyer. *Heavily chaperoned!* I have heard them say, "You do know you can just stay home, don't you? You haven't forgotten your sixth-grade dance, have you?" I have heard them say, "When you *adopt* kids," when I talk about the many sons and daughters I will have and feed ice cream to after their first dances.

No, I have not forgotten my sixth-grade dance. I have not forgotten my fifth-grade sleepover. I have not forgotten my third-grade class trip to the beach. It's not that I forget my salt baths and soda water. It's that the older I get, the faster we run. And I'm tired of running.

I unstuff my secret book from the bottom of my backpack and flip to the proper page. When we were packing up our Pittsburgh life—an ice pack between my legs, patent-leather shoes still shining on my feet—I discovered the coffee-ringed binding low and backward on our bookshelf. I took a cue from my parents, opened to a page and found my solution. I decided to grow out my hair. I decided to grow out my hair so long that, from behind, the girls will think I'm one of them. The boys might laugh, but I won't tell my siblings and so I won't mind. And Zeph will stop caring about the boys if I can get myself a girl. Proof, in his eyes, that I'm okay. That we can stay.

And the girls—they'll touch my locks as if my head grew gossamer guitar strings. They'll want to braid my long, thick red hair, but they will not. Because I won't be one of them. I will be me, Sampson, even more heart-stopping than my older brother Zeph.

I close the old Bible around my finger, right along the smudge my parents must have left when they pointed to the page that would become me. I can picture my first school dance in Cleveland like it's the start of a long domino line of others. Because when I turn to the girls and they see the truth—that I'm not one of them, that I am me instead—they'll start wanting different things. They'll want to cut my hair. This will be a desire elemental in them, like a hen wanting to sit on her eggs. A strong person wanting to kick a weak one. And at the dance on Friday, I will say no to every girl but the right one.

How will I know which one is the right one?
You know what you know, says Lamentations.

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The inconvenient snag, of course, is that hair

takes time to grow. So much time that, two whole months into my project, no one has noticed anything different—aside from Connor, who slaps me on the back, rubs the scrawny beginnings of his beard, and says, "Mini-mullet, man."

I think this is a compliment.

So at this rate I won't calm my brother and sister's fears as quickly as I need to—that is, in time for the seventh-grade dance. The first sign of trouble. Wednesday, and all I've got is a mud-colored mini-mullet and a Thursday-afternoon barber's appointment that Lamentations booked when I finally convinced her that she couldn't dissuade me from dancing. I plan to skip the appointment, but that will only gain me an eighth of an inch or so by Friday night.

I am sitting in French class before the bell, scratching my scalp, when Missy May says, "You have lice or something?"

Missy May sits behind me because she's tall enough to see right over my head. Connor used to call her Missy May I—Missy May I piss? Missy May I fart?—until I told him I was bored of that joke and we should pick something else, and then forgot to pick something else. She asks her question in her quietest voice. Pittsburgh Jack would have yelled the question loud enough to hear in Cleveland.

"No," I say. "wikiHow says agitating the follicles can make your hair grow faster."

A sort of sorrow forms on Missy May's face below her thick dark eyebrows and full brown bangs. "Why do you want your hair to grow faster?"

I shrug.

"Well, whatever," says Missy May. "Where do you live?"

In the past, I've had bad experiences with people knowing where I live. Pittsburgh Jack egged what he thought was my bedroom window while my brother was doing God-knows-what to Pittsburgh Genevieve, and Zeph only barely managed to transform the dripping yellow yolk into an aphrodisiac.

But he managed.

"Why do you want to know where I live?" I say.

Missy May shrugs.

"Well, whatever," I say. "Sixty-eight High Street."

One thing about Sampson, says Lamentations. He never learns.

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"There's a girl at the door," my sister says that

evening after dinner. Zeph removes his blistered fingertips from his guitar, opens the door, finds a tall but too-young stranger with long eyelashes, blames his reputation.

"Is Sampson here?" says the girl.

Lamentations tells Zeph that a gaping mouth is the sign of a barren mind, but they both watch as I descend the stairs, wave hello, and accept a bottle of shampoo from the outstretched arms of Missy May.

"Who was that?" says Lamentations, as Missy May's tresses bob away down the sidewalk.

I shrug.

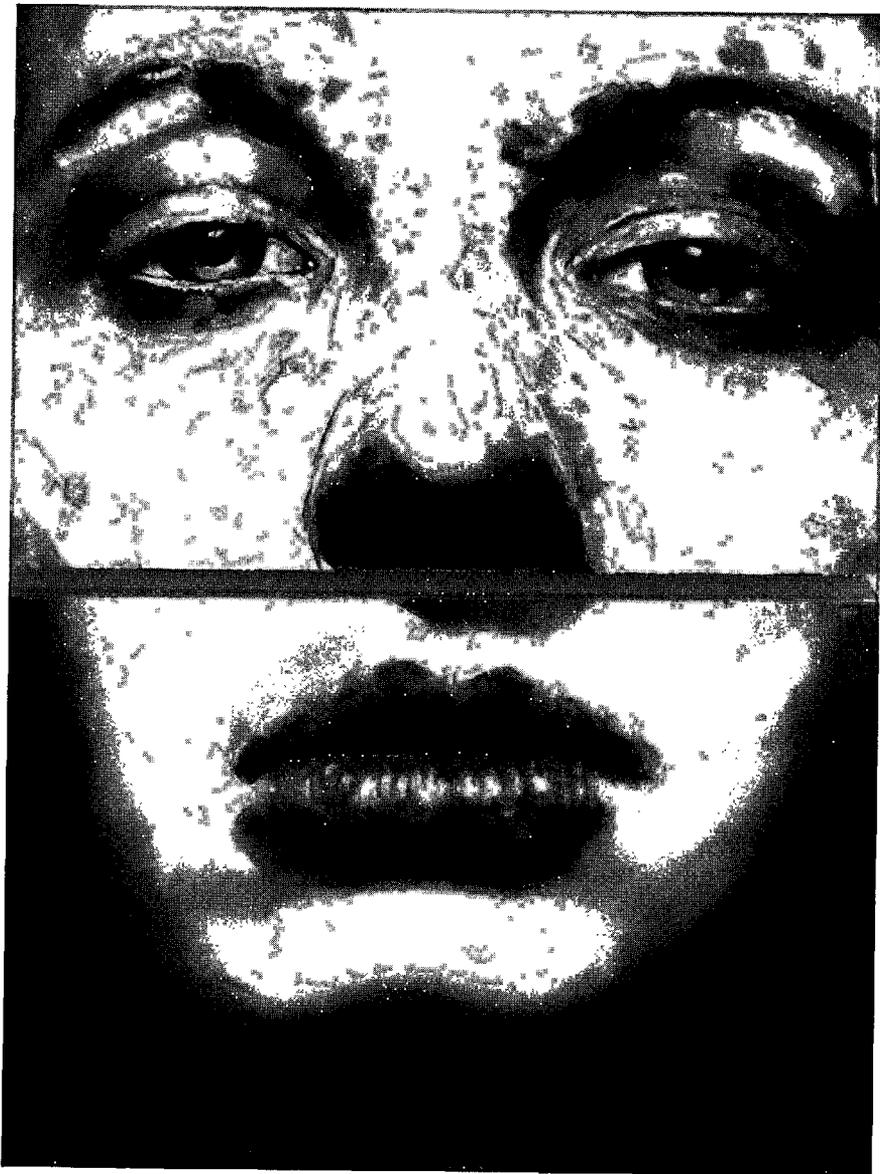
"My date," I say.

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In the shower late that night, I squint at the

bottle in my hands: HAIR GROWTH SHAMPOO, reads the label. SPECIAL FORMUAL.

I let myself feel sad for a moment. Misspellings always make me feel sad for a moment, because they remind me of my parents, who got Zephaniah spot-on but missed Samson. What was it about me? One p too many, one part too few,



one dose of worry too much. I lather the shampoo in my hands. It smells succulent, floral, and I'm thrown helplessly back to being a toddler in a crib as Lamentations spritzed hibiscus perfume on her wrists before a date. When was the last time Lamentations sprayed perfume as sweet as this?

I have to make it work in this school. I have to let my sister be happy.

The shampoo turns to a lilac froth in my palms. Beyond and beneath the foam, I can see the source of all my siblings' worry. I don't avoid looking. There isn't much to see: thigh, skin, thigh. Less distasteful, if you ask me, than the oddities most people carry about. A prudish art student's reverie.

Sampsonette, Pittsburgh Jack said when he first saw the flatness under my shorts in the cafeteria bathroom mid-dance. Even though we'd played kickball together all that summer. Even though he lived next door and his mother hung his SeaWorld underwear out to dry above our vegetable garden. Even though Lamentations made him lemonade to sell in the driveway and Zeph once loaned him a fedora that we never got back.

Idiot, I didn't say to Pittsburgh Jack. *Not-having doesn't make you a girl. Girls aren't, like, blank down there. Girls, you know, they have.* Jack could have consulted my brother if he didn't know that much. The sad thing is, Zeph would have loved to be consulted. Zeph would have loved to be somebody normal's big brother. Zeph is a model for how to succeed extraordinarily, as long as you are normal.

I raise the shampoo to my head. I knead the suds into my scalp, careful to agitate the hair follicles as thoroughly as possible. I feel a tingle at the crown of my skull, maybe, but that could just be my vigorous rubbing. When I get out of the shower, I check the time and the mirror: Thursday, and all I've got is a

mini-mullet, a barber's appointment I intend to miss, a tuft of purple shampoo in my ear, and a date to the dance.

It's not nothing, Lamentations might say.

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Thursday morning, I walk in on my siblings at the kitchen table, talking real estate. "Akron," says my brother.

"St. Louis," says my sister.

"Cincinnati."

"Indianapolis."

"Indianapolis," repeats Zeph. "Just two states from Pennsylvania."

"We'll see if they've got a good clinic," says Lamentations. "Maybe even a homeschool support group." Something glassy clinks on the counter. "These dances just keep coming, don't they?"

I am not supposed to hear these conversations, because they (a) show how little faith my siblings have in my ability to settle anywhere with a modicum of social success, and (b) remind me that I am ruining their lives. I suspect that Zeph really liked Genevieve, his guitarist girlfriend from the Pittsburgh ice cream parlor, who showed up once on his caller ID here in Cleveland before he deleted her number. Then he listened seventeen times to the song she wrote him, before he deleted that too. *Zephaniah, Can I Have a Twist*. I liked her.

"Ahem," I say, so they stop talking.

"Jesus Christ," says Zeph, setting down his guitar and the bandages he's pasting to his fingertips. "What the hell did you do to your hair?"

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And just like that, everything is different. My

hair is red as a stop sign and curly as scissored ribbon (though it hasn't grown longer). I bounce my way through school like a living traffic light. The girls at school don't know what to do with themselves. They coil each lock around their fingers like a spool of thread. They walk next to me in the hall between classes so they can pull and release a single ringlet.

God, they say. I wish I had your hair.

I don't tell them that, come Friday, one lucky winner will.

Connor, who has ample, arched eyelashes that used to be the envy of the girls, is flabbergasted. "How'd you do it, man?" he says. He punches me in the shoulder. If not for my mind, my body would never know that having friends is different from having enemies.

"What a coup!" he whoops. He has taken to whooping lately, ever since our unit on Native American history, though I thought Mr. Harmon delivered lessons of exceptional sensitivity.

Still. He is my friend, and I can't complain about that.

In French class, Missy May gives me a smile as wide as a Bible.

"It worked!" she says.

"It worked!" I concur.

I don't remind her it didn't work exactly as the bottle promised. She takes her seat behind me, her mouth shrinking to a more manageable, Genesis-sized grin. I see my mane reflected between her dark lashes.

"Do you want to touch a curl?" I say—my plan already a success, my hair soon to be shorn as I emerge, boyish and beloved.

Though Missy May sustains that inward, cryptic smile, she shakes her head. No. I feel my heart falter for a moment. But there are twelve other girls in class hovering around my desk, and another dozen at least I can see pressed like panini against the window.

Suit yourself, Lamentations would say.

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After school, I refuse to board my sister's car

bound for my haircut.

"But Sampson," says Lamentations. "Don't you want to look smart for your first dance here in Cleveland?"

But Sampson, she means. You already look weird enough.

I never fight with my sister, but now we fight. She hugs me around the waist and tries to lift me physically out the door and into the car. I squirm from her grip. She grabs me by the curls as I run away to the kitchen. She tugs. I yelp. I clap my hands around hers, and she drops my hair. Upstairs, Zeph strokes G over and over, his tuner humming that he's flat. She steps on Paws. I step on Tobit. Both cats yowl.

"I just want you to look nice," she says at last, sinking into a kitchen chair. She doesn't look so nice herself: her dress is disheveled; she might be crying. "What use beauty to the blind?" she says.

I slump into the chair opposite hers. My sister thinks something in me could be beautiful. I want to say, *I'm sorry that the world is blind*, but Zeph lopez downstairs holding a bag of plastic picks.

"There's someone ringing the bell," says Zeph.

I check: Missy May is on the front porch, carrying a brush; I suppose she wants me to groom the hair that she's refused to touch.

"It's Sampson's date," says Lamentations.

"I'm not so sure about that," I say, not answering the door.

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I go to the dance alone. Lamentations drives.

Zeph sits in the backseat with me, straightening my tie, which is a slim gray silk he lent me. "You don't have to go," says Lamentations.

"I'm going," I say.

We pull up in front of the school cafeteria. I twist my curly red mini-mullet nervously into a ponytail, then release it. I open the back door and stick out my leg. "Have you ever heard about the races in Indianapolis?" says Lamentations. "Take it all in for me, little man," says Zeph, that cowboy kick in his throat.

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What my brother and sister don't know is that I

am carrying a pair of scissors in my pocket. Not to become the sociopath they not-so-secretly fear I will become—but to give to the girl who will cut my hair and so become my girlfriend, and so ensure that Zeph and Lamentations will believe me when I tell them I can thrive, we can stay, they can live.

They also don't know that I could have had my pick of dates to the dance, but none of the hair-coddling girls in particular struck my fancy. My siblings always assume that no one will ever love me as long as I live, not if I stay as I am—but as I walk into the strobe-lit cafeteria, a new thought occurs to me: what if plenty of people will love me, but never the right ones, the ones I'm able to love back?

No way, I tell myself. Already Zeph and Lamentations and I love one another, so much that we'll all make ourselves miserable trying to make each other happy.

But family is family, says Lamentations. Which means it's not the same.

Inside the cafeteria, my neck is sweating under my muggy mop of curls. I distance myself from the DJ's

pulsing-hot speakers and stand beside the bathroom, lifting my hair off my nape like a curtain to air out. The pushed-aside cafeteria tables are bustling with boys thinking about asking girls to slow dance. As I am cooling off, Connor surfaces from screwing with the fog machine, socks me in the stomach, and says, "Is that a flask in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

"Haha," I say.

Connor shakes his head fondly. "You're all right, dude," he says, his voice cracking high then low, before he wanders off to find Mr. Harmon pouring seltzer. It's nice, having friends.

"I know what that is in your pocket," says a voice speaking at its quietest register. "It isn't a flask. It's a pair of hair scissors."

"What do you care, Missy May?" I say. "You don't want anything to do with my hair."

"Sure I do," she says. She's wearing high pink socks and an emerald dress that falls just above her knees, leaving an inch of joint exposed.

"Well, you don't want to cut it."

"No," says Missy May. "I don't want to cut it."

"Missy May I ask: Why not?" I say, miserably. I feel choked, a lump caught like an apple in my throat. Maybe Indiana wouldn't be so bad. Maybe they make special speedway ice cream. Maybe Zeph would find a country girl there to write him a new song. *Zephaniah, Don't You Fly Away.*

"I want you to keep your hair," says Missy May. "I don't want to touch a strand and curse it for you—you're lucky to have it, and strong enough to keep it."

My curls tumble around my ears as I shake my head. I think about my failed plan, and how I shouldn't have fought with Lamentations when she just wanted to give me a good dance. "I don't feel strong," I say.

She smiles that enigmatic smile, tightened now to the size of a psalm. She bends down, takes my hand, and leads me out the exit door to the fluorescent yellow stairwell.

"Not yet, you don't," says Missy May.

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Missy May wears a wig. That's why she has

special-formula hair growth shampoo. She's as bald as an eagle. Her eyelashes are glue and nylon. Even her eyebrows are painted on.

As soon as she takes off her hair, I assume she is dying of cancer, which makes me want to beat the scissors with the loudest possible clang against the metal railings, but she says no, her hair's no fatal sign; she just never grew any.

I feel Zeph's cowboy standing on my neck. "Thank God," I say, meaning it. But then I get suspicious. "Why did you tell me your secret?" I say.

She shrugs, but I can tell that she suspects I have a secret to exchange for hers. She stands before me, shiny bald and bright as a watermelon, waiting for me to prove I never learn my lesson. Well, says Lamentations, fair is fair.

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"Why don't you just get surgery?" says Missy

May, her hair back on her head, my suit retucked. "You'd make your siblings happy."

"Because," I say.

"Because why?"

I can feel the footfalls of the dance deep inside the bass-thumping stairwell. I think about telling her, *Because of a private because*, but then I remember that this is the girl I have chosen to cut my hair.

"Okay," I say. "I'll tell you the reason."

"Okay," she says.

"Do you promise not to laugh?" I say. My extra lung is taking in extra air. I worry sometimes, when I feel myself filling up like this, that what my extra lung is doing is taking in extra water. *Bail me out*, my extra lung is saying. And I, like the doctors who didn't save my parents, say back, *Hush, don't worry. Nothing's wrong.*

"Of course," says Missy May. "Of course I promise not to laugh."

"Do you promise not to tell me if you think I'm stupid?"

"I don't think you're stupid."

"But if you start to?"

"I promise not to tell you if I start to think you're stupid."

***She smiles that enigmatic smile,
tightened now to the size of a psalm.***

"Fine," I say. I take a deep breath into all three lungs. I touch the fire exit railing, and it buzzes like a thrummed chord. Zeph hasn't even visited the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame here yet. "I don't want surgery because I think I'm beautiful."

Missy May doesn't laugh.

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"Missy May and I will name our children Yes and

Sure and Always," I tell Lamentations after the dance. She has set out strawberry ice cream for me and a beer for Zeph at the kitchen table. Zeph has his guitar strapped across his chest and is strumming absently. Next to my napkin I have laid my scissors, unused. "And if our kids have hair," I tell my siblings, "we won't ever cut it. And if they don't have hair, well—we still won't ever cut it!"

I laugh, just like Missy May and I did when we got to talking long enough that we could invite laughter like a naughty child back into the room.

"And how exactly do you plan to have these children?" says Lamentations.

I set my spoon down in a melting milky pool. I feel an unfamiliar weariness in me: because Lamentations isn't satisfied; because the truth is I don't know. Missy May and I hadn't talked *that* long—or else we had avoided this particular unanswerable question.

"Leave the kid alone!" says Zeph, sweeping an ugly sound across the strings of his guitar. His empty beer flies off the table's edge. "What does he need with logistics? He's in love." Lamentations looks at Zeph kindly, even a little sadly. She leans down and kisses the top of his head, mussing his close-cropped hair. She clears away our dishes and the bottle. Zeph curls his blistered fingers once more above the strings. "Let him have his time to be in love." **CS**