

light reading series

featherproof 



Abby Glogower

M  
IS FOR  
MY HAIR

If my life were not a life, but a novel instead, Mariola, would land an integral role. That skinny little girl who works at the beauty store down the street—of such minor consequence to most any narrative but her own—could be transformed into a pure, vast device. Cast at once as tabula so rasa, avis so rara, all could bounce and refract off her, illuminating truths so big; or at least beauty tips so useful.

‘M’ is for me. ‘M’ is for Mariola. ‘M’ is for my hair.

I moved to Greenpoint, Brooklyn, just as August reached the lip of its zipper in 2002. The wonders of Zyweic (pronounced “jhiviet”) and Czech Rebel beers—purchasable at any hour of the night in the corner bodega for 99 cents—quickly made themselves known.

For as long as the weather remained reasonable, my corner had its steady retinue of bums screaming obscenities and spanging slurrily all hours of the day and night. For a while, my housemate took to photographing them out of our one window facing the street. “I see you up there!” the matron of the camp shrieked at me as I peered over his shoulder. She knew I didn’t approve of his choice in subject matter.

I devised a daily route to work involving a complicated transfer of trains that eventually birthed itself into the realm of rote ease; I began to settle into life.

I first met Mariola at one of the half-dozen 99-cent stores lining the avenue. These, I discovered, were a great spot for socks, undershirts, tins of mixed nuts (mostly peanuts) and other

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**AbbyG.** is a midwesterner who keeps giving the coasts a try. Her writing has appeared in *F Magazine*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Dove-tail Tract* and dozens of homemade publications. She’s a nice Jewish girl, a drifter, and sort of a musician. A sentimental loudmouth, she enjoys memoirs, bikes, whiskey and liesure. You can contact her at [sweetabbyg@yahoo.com](mailto:sweetabbyg@yahoo.com)



At that point my hair had been red for four going on five years. It first went red when I was living in Pittsburgh. Donny came over and assuring me he'd "Oh, dyed hard-to-believe years. It first went red when I was living in messy mop of fine, coarsely chopped blond and brown streaks.

The girl told me that she cut her hair up the street, indicating some location with a vague flutter of her thin hand. I smiled, collected my purchases and left. Her hair wasn't bad either: a promised to take me back home with him. We staggered around with him and his friends into a bar or two and I almost followed him into a cab. When we got home my friend Avi chewed me out for showing what I guess was an inappropriate amount of interest in the guy. "You should have stayed mysterious." He chided earnestly. "You had him right at the moment you smiled, parted your head and said 'Oh yeah, my hair... thanks.'"

"Thank you," I murmured to the girl. I was genuinely flattered, adding proudly, "I cut it myself."

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Everyone at work laughed at me, empty assuring me that the color was fine; rather it was the hat-head that was funny looking. Borrowing some hairspray, I charged into the bathroom and gave myself a faux-hawk that I thought looked rather cute.

After letting my head heal for a good 48 hours, I returned

to Zoe's in search of a gold or red-based brown to neutralize the green. Mariola was shocked and sympathetic when I came in, touching my hand and uttering, "I heard." She and her sister had moved out into their own place but her mom was begging them to come home. Again, we debated borders and test strips. We settled. I paid. I got home and realized I was out of developer. I nudged back and Mariola let me slide the 7 cents I was short. I was exhausted from the whole ordeal. And so was my hair. I never went back to Zoe's again.

I ended up moving out of Greenpoint that following summer but that wasn't hair-related. At least, I don't think. Fully a month after that ordeal, my friend Rus told me my hair still looked kind of green and not at all like Jane Fonda's, although I added that part in my head.

One night, shortly before I left New York, I was walking in the East Village at 4am with one of my oldest friends. I asked a handsome guy for a light. Weaving slightly, he was happy to oblige. He leaned in and in an attractive accent said, "I do not mean to upset your boyfriend here but you have a very lovely haircut, very intriguing." I guess that drunkenness and street lamps easily disguise green. Turned out he was from Italy and he promised to take me back home with him. We staggered around with him and his friends into a bar or two and I almost followed him into a cab. When we got home my friend Avi chewed me out for showing what I guess was an inappropriate amount of interest in the guy. "You should have stayed mysterious." He chided earnestly. "You had him right at the moment you smiled, parted your head and said 'Oh yeah, my hair... thanks.'"

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lots of hair." We gave it a go in my bathroom, where a perpetual hair clog haunted the shower drain. It was temporary dye that lasted, with refreshing, for many months.

Thinking it might be time to attempt a return to nature, I sought out the girl from the 99-cent store for a consultation. Her co-workers there referred me to her other place of employment, the newly opened Zoe's Beauty Products down the street from my house. Sure enough, the next night Mariola—though it would still be a few visits before I learned her name—was there. She informed me matter-of-factly that to remove the red, I'd have to strip.

Making our best guess as to the real color of my hair, Mariola and I picked a dark blonde and then stood outside smoking cigarettes while she told me how tired she was of living with her parents. They'd come from Poland recently but already she wanted out. When conversing with someone who doesn't speak your language very well, a particular strain of self-consciousness itchy reminds you how little you know about. But I liked her and we introduced ourselves formally when I went back a month later for more blond. "I like this!" she exclaimed when I told her my name and then began calling excitedly in Polish to her co-worker. Based on all of our previous conversations and the way she gestured to my head, grazing my hair and pointing like a mad phrenologist, I think she was telling her friend that I once had dreadlocks, but now cut my own hair.

I remember the first time I cut my hair. I was about four or five. I remember my mother peeling the new pair of white plastic-coated safety scissors from their cardboard backing and handing them to me. In a dream-sequence echo she says firmly, "Now Abby, remember, these are not for books and not for hair."

Spring was coming (sort of) and nature was getting back to itself, but not to my hair. The blond didn't match exactly and as it grew out, it became downright offensive looking. My life in cutting my hair to varying degrees of disaster for two decades.

vanity that carries its own secondary exhilaration. I continued results in a minor subversion of social norms and conventions for a job poorly done. Disregarding these consequences entirely only concrete ramifications being ostracization and mockery this process of bodily self-transformation is intoxicating. The without the threat of physical pain. The agency attained through Hair is an extension of our bodies, something that can be altered because I had discovered the thrill of cutting one's own hair. episode captured the title for most dramatic, hideous hair-cutting catastrophe. I was not content with a mere snip of the bangs. There are many children in my family and I suspect that tiny head.

hair forming a patchy, moth-eaten, corn silk helmet around my over him in a shirt with balloons on it and a strange grin, my dimples, an angelic smile and a colander on his head. I loom fall leaves. We make a funny pair to be sure: he's seated, wearing My little brother and I are in the front lawn playing in a pile of herself to do. One particular picture stands out in my mind. done to fix it but to shave my head, which she couldn't bring years later my mother conceded that nothing could have been the aftermath. I had shorn my hair so close in some places that My memory ends there. But we have some photographs of garden. The day is warm and sunny.

off into our back yard in which my family was trying to start a is distracted with something, a phone call perhaps, and I slip I nod obediently in full understanding. Shortly there after she

New York was not as charmed as I'd hoped and I noticed that all of the beautiful women I saw had dark hair. I wanted to look like Jane Fonda circa 1970, but I couldn't. I visited Mariola one night intent on becoming a brunette. As an offering of sorts I brought her not only some promised pictures of me with dreadlocks but the actual dreads themselves, which (and you needn't tell me how creepy this is, I already know) I had saved ceremoniously in a bulging Ziploc bag. Not phased in the slightest, cooing in fact, she gingerly removed one from the heap and examined the eerie specimen like an awed scientist, murmuring over and over "I want to do this in my hair so much."

Then the work began. We moved with a flighty conscientiousness up and down the aisles of tiny bottles occasionally garnished with a cautionary index card, on which the words "use at your own risk" were printed neatly, ominously, in black marker. We fingered many synthetic sample strands curled in sweet, pert little loops. Judiciously debating brands and bases we finally decided on a shade called "Gem Luster." "This will be nice," Mariola nodded confidently, adding with a wink that she'd give me a discount. I capriciously added to the bill a bottle of expensive nail polish I knew I'd never use.

The ridiculous tradition of Lynn and I as haircut buddies was actually an outgrowth (pun, although not really intended, not exactly minded) of our usual "Friday Night Beer and Records Spot." This weekly event, which was little more than a sacramental ritualization of our dismal social lives, began at the end of my junior year of college, his sophomore. Due to some mysterious circumstances I didn't wholly understand, his roommate had vacated earlier in the year leaving Lynn serendipitously with a much-coveted "super single." My advantageous

of-age status made me the default provider of the evening's case of beer, which I dutifully hauled over on my bike rain or shine, often rain. Lynn's room was always a terrific mess and often times records had to be unearthed from piles of socks or heaps of philosophy papers to be reunited with their crinkled sleeves or maneuvered clumsily onto the turntable, whose finicky belt was always slipping.

One night, Lynn announced he needed a haircut and handed me a pair of scissors. It was true, his wild blondish mop completely covered his eyes; an effect (combined with his shuffling walk, famous reticence and charming stutter) that drove the ladies wild, but hampered his visibility. It was pouring that night. Barefoot and with beers in tow, we stopped at the vending machine for some Cheez-Its and then proceeded to the concrete lean-to area outside the dorm. I snipped away, listening to the spring thunder and Lynn's ramblings about his latest Freud paper. We were blotto by that point, and so was the rest of the world it seemed. Students stumbled by, utterly soaked, exclaiming, "Hey look! Someone's getting a haircut!" I insisted on keeping some curly little wisps around his ears to make him look "mod," whatever I figured that meant in my impaired state. Any and all of my executive decisions were always met with an agreeable "You're the best, Abbers."

A year later, Lynn was trimming my hair on the roof of his house as we exchanged guilty confessions of fantasies involving our first loves calling for us on their deathbeds. "You, you, you gotta kill that dream, Abbers." Lynn advised, getting lost in thought after each snip. He was right. Inevitably, each haircut—especially a memorable midnight one on the jungle gym of a Catholic school playground—was followed the next morning

"How did it turn out?" asked the one as we stepped into the store and they began turning on lights. I yanked my hat off dramatically and let the Onyx Sheen bare its piece. "Oh, I like this color on you." She exclaimed in her thick Polish accent. "I need some stripper?" I said curtly. Then the wrangling began. They didn't want to sell me the stripper insisting that it would

run off for an interpreter. "Yes, I'm looking for..." she had to politely raise a finger and which was funny and weird because as soon as someone said, any English except for a timid and excited "Can I help you?" sale the night before and the other was Ella, who spoke hardly women came to open up. One of them had been there for the side Zoë's beauty store in a bar, smoking cigarettes until some The next morning I called in late to work and stood out-

ter." And, as you know, there was a war on at the time. admonished, sipping their whiskeys with ice, "now that's a disaster." "War," they under any circumstances, to consider it a "disaster." "War," they my head and went to the bar. Joe and Amy told me I was not, Sicken and unsure of what to do, I tied a scarf around

suppose we're all only human. label of changeling dye revealed. Mariola had led me astray. I black but black and blue; "Onyx Sheen," as the fine print on the minutes. When I washed out my hair it was jet black. Not just picked at my toenails watching T.V. for 20 wholly unconcerned of blue-based medium ash-browns I figured it was normal and looked suspiciously blue. Not familiar with the idiosyncrasies Back in my laboratory, my bathroom, the dye on my head

nearly as awesome once we'd gained some clarity. Some. Our haircuts always looked mighty fucking funny, and not by a "fix-it"riage session to catch all the stray parts we'd missed.