

Meagan Trammell

Tug

If there was anything Scott assumed would meet him at the start of middle-age, it was not the ear hair. Relative stability, yes. A new appreciation for routine, most definitely. Yet, when he settled in for his bi-weekly shave in front of the bathroom mirror the morning of his fiftieth birthday, he spent a good half hour leaning over the sink to study it. Gray and curled in its fineness—this he wasn't bothered by; his hair had gone thin and mostly silver a good ten years ago—jutting out with all the brash surety of a flagpole staked at the crest of a claimed hill. He wouldn't have had any problem plucking it and had his tweezers ready to go when his eyes followed the track of the hair straight into his ear canal.

He'd heard from his work buddies how quick their wives were to catch any mistakes in their grooming habits, pointing out a missed nose hair here, an abnormally-long neck hair there. Ten years ago he would have been envious of them, having someone around constantly who cared so much. Now, however, he was thankful that he had committed to bachelorhood, because pulling this particular hair was going to take some time. All his life Scott had possessed what some would call a peculiar fear of damaging the inside of his ear. Maybe it had something to do with having temporarily lost his hearing in the third grade when he was hit in the ear with a basketball thrown by one of his friends, or maybe it was the fact that afterward he had a doctor stick a probe none-too-gently inside to assess the situation. Either way, he wasn't taking any chances, especially since he'd begun to realize years ago just how suddenly and easily normal biological functions could break down.

A day went by, then a week. During that time he had been so busy that he hadn't taken notice of the hair. But at the start of the weekend, Scott noticed how eyes would wander to his

ear, and he resolved to pluck the thing as soon as he got home. But no matter how much he pumped himself up in the car, he was still left standing, frozen, in front of the mirror, heart thudding at the sight of it now. Whereas before it had only one curl to it, there were three, and it was pure white, almost translucent, like the hair on those mummies he saw unearthed on the History Channel. It was unlike any hair he had ever seen on his entire body, and, for a terrifying moment, he imagined himself lying on that cold exam table where the mummy had been, leathery body empty of organs, its own tomb, and the archeologist saying, just like they had on that show, “Supposedly, he died when he was only around fifty years old,” and her assistant bobbing his head and commenting, “So young” as he tweezed a couple of mummy hairs into a vial. Shivering, Scott seized a bottle of year-old lotion and slathered it all over his exposed skin.

You’re stupid, he told himself, picking up the tweezers and trying not to think of the archeologist. *You’re being a baby. It’s just a hair.* He couldn’t help but remember how, during that history program, he’d learned that the assumption that people didn’t live long back then was false; only that the high infant mortality rate heavily skewed overall lifespans. “In other words,” said the host, with a voice like the whisper of a coffin closing over a corpse, “if you lived past childhood you were, for the most part, safe.”

For the most part. In that moment, Scott remembered pulling the loose thread of his mother’s incomplete knitting project as a child, watching it all unravel, as if it hadn’t even existed, its form collapsing with barely a sound. Unmade in a matter of seconds.

Taking a deep breath, Scott pinched the end of the hair between the tweezers, slowly pulling. And, in his ear at the other side of his head, like an archeologist’s hum full of superficial pity: a tug.