

The Rat-Tail

Deep inside Tom's top dresser drawer, behind his balled-up tube socks and white, neatly folded briefs, is a small plastic baggy with a four-inch long lock of hair, only visible when Tom is down to his last few pairs. It's been there in the darkness for years, so long that to Tom it's become a permanent fixture to that top drawer. On those last few days of his laundry cycle, Tom would take slight notice of the ancient zip-locked baggy containing the visible relic, and would feel a sudden sense of relief and self-reassurance radiate throughout his entire body. For Tom, it was as if all the malevolence of his life was limp, lifeless, and contained.

When Tom was a child, he saw on the television two long-haired men at a concert, waving and shaking their heads to the music in the background. Thinking that it looked like fun, he told his mother that he wanted long hair.

"What, you mean like a pony tail?"

Little Tommy hesitated, considering whether the wild hair could be put into a pony tail, and nodded his head. His mother did not want to completely discourage the boy, but she could not allow him to go without getting a haircut. Her father, Tommy's grandfather, would never approve. When it came time for Tommy's next haircut, his mother told him not to worry, she had an idea that would make him happy.

Just before Tommy's haircut, his mother took the hairstylist aside, out of Tommy's range of hearing, and gave her instructions for Tommy's new hairstyle. She told her to give him his usual haircut, but to avoid cutting the middle of the neckline. The stylist understood the mother, and although she knew it was called a 'rat-tail,' she refrained from using the word.

Over time, Tommy would see in the mirror that his hair had failed to grow any further than his original hairline. He didn't hate his haircuts, and he felt it wouldn't have been worth the fight to stay out of the barber's chair. He had always known and accepted that his mother had a strong influence over his life, and reasoned that she had simply refused his request without denying him directly. There would be no point in confrontation, she was blessed with the art of changing the subject, something impossible for an eight year-old to counter.

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Two years after Tommy's new hairstyle request, he started the fifth grade with a new seating arrangement. The child sitting in front of him had a crew-cut haircut, with one exception: a curly, squirming braid of hair at the middle of his neckline.

The sight of that miniature pony-tail repulsed Tommy. He had never seen such an ugly feature on a person! There it was, clinging on carelessly, sucking the blood out of the base of the poor boy's skull. The leech hypnotically swung by its teeth, never releasing his clench on the poor boy. Tommy felt mocked by the creature, feeling so powerless. He had never been so tempted to violate another person's space as he did then, to grab the scissors out of his desk and cut off that little pest. He had considered many times whether he should tell the boy to eliminate the creature, but he ultimately decided that it was too risky; the boy could be in league with it. Day after day, Tommy had to sit through class, trying to stop himself from staring at the monstrosity. He found it difficult to concentrate on his classwork, and when his classmate was absent he felt overjoyed and spent the day in disbelief of his good fortune. Several times he thought to ask the teacher to switch seats with another student, but he knew that the idea of it alone would continue to haunt him. At least now he was in a position to keep an eye on it, lest it intended to cause some kind of mischief if it should tire of its host.

After several months of this torture, Tommy went in for another haircut. The stylist did her work, and using the mirror on the wall and a hand-held mirror, showed Tommy the back of his head – a courtesy never before offered to him by a stylist. Suddenly, Tommy froze in the chair. In the mirror he could see a rat-tail hanging and swinging on the back of his head, larger than the creature that leeches on the boy in his class. He had never fully realized that there was such a beast behind his head. Sure, he had been somewhat aware that his hair was a bit longer in the back, from the times he'd brush up against it momentarily when combing his hair, or curling his finger around it when he was nervously studying for school. He had never considered a connection between that seemingly innocuous lock of hair with the horror that taunted him on a daily basis. But now, in that glass, he was given a glimpse of that infiltrator in its full form; its hideous shape and malicious intent. Tommy had never felt so many emotions at one time. Hatred, disgust, and fear of the little devil. The notion of being alone overwhelmed him – betrayed by his own mother! She nurtured its growth, brought life to a monster! And where were his friends, the people he trusted? But above all, he felt a self-loathing for his own ignorance. How did he become such an unwitting victim? He wanted to blame his distracting class taunter, but maybe there was something deeper within him,

something preventing his awareness of being a victim. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time nor skill to psychoanalyze himself just now, he had higher priorities to think about. He may not be able to attack that leeching taunter, but he knew he could... nay, he must... remove this tail. He also realized that he had to do it himself, and take it by surprise.

Tommy had decided to wait some time to launch his attack. He knew he had to be alone, for two reasons: to prevent anyone else from stopping his attack midway, and to ensure the sanctity of the moment. After all, this wasn't just a haircut, this was an exorcism. Furthermore, he couldn't just go and grab scissors to do the deed, he needed an excuse to pick them up in the first place. Otherwise, the little demon could suspect the oncoming battle and make a preemptive strike. So Tommy waited, biding his time for an opportunity, a moment it would seem natural for him to hold a pair of scissors, alone.

The contemplation of the method of the future operation consumed Tommy's time. For hours he'd sit in his room, asking himself what needed to be cut. He was still careful not to let the leech suspect his thoughts of monsticide, so he would pretend to read a book while shifting his eyes around the room, turning the page every few minutes, even taking a moment to mumble some of the words on the page to further convince the worm of his deception. Unfortunately, his mother kept his room extremely tidy, clean, and unfrayed. He thought about cutting something in the bathroom, but not having any hair on his prepubescent body didn't help. Tommy's blank, distant stares at the dinner table worried his parents, but he was polite, quiet, and ate his food, so they didn't pay his strangely gentle behavior much attention.

Five days of exhaustive searching came to an end when Tommy was sitting down, tying his shoe. He noticed a loose thread at the edge of his sock and commenced to pull at it, as was his habit. Before it snapped, he froze with a revelation. He immediately got up, went for the nearest scissors, and proceeded to cut the thread. He couldn't do the deed now, but had to make it seem like it was a new habit he was learning. He would have to wait until the following day to perform the cut.

That whole day Tommy was giddy with happiness. His classmates and teacher all noticed a change in his behavior and were glad to see it. His newfound spirit was contagious, and soon everyone he had made contact with, and those who had contact with those people, were bursting with joy, smiling and giggling, excited about the wonderful tomorrow, although none but Tommy understood why.

Tommy awoke the next morning, ready to start his day. His first impulse was to rush his daily routine, but took a moment to remind himself to slow down and take his time, as was his custom. He painfully prepared and ate his cereal, fighting the urge to hurry ... he was surprised at how his efforts of patience made every bite contain more intense flavor than all of the other meals he'd had up until then.

After a few other tedious routines, it was finally time to pick out his clothes. Opening his sock drawer, he looked for a pair of socks with the longest loose threads. After a small, but thorough search, he found a pair and continued to extract the rest of his clothes. After throwing on his other clothes, he grabbed his socks and shoes and sat down to put them on. His hands were shaking as he slid his socks onto his feet. Upon completion, he stood up to find a pair of scissors.

"Tommy, are you ready for school yet?!" His mother asked from her bedroom.

"Just a minute Mom, I need to put on my shoes!" Tommy replied. He couldn't let his mother get in the way of his mission. He ran to find the scissors, but they weren't in their usual place on the kitchen counter, next to the phone. Shuffling frantically through several drawers, he finally found a pair of safety scissors with round ends that Tommy used as a child. They would have to do.

Tommy went back to his bedroom and closed the door. He sat on the bed, trimmed the thread on his left sock, then his right. He threw the threads into the waste basket beside the bed and proceeded to take a deep breath.

With the tool of his surgery in his dexterous right hand, he swiftly grabbed the parasite with his left. He tugged on it, stretching out its body, and placed the scissors' blades as close to his scalp as possible. With as much determination and force as Tommy could muster, he flicked his fingers together. The clump of hair had separated from his body and he brought the fistful before his eyes. Almost immediately after he extended his fingers to see his persecutor directly, he dropped the clump of hair on the bed as if it was a hot coal. There, on his unmade bed-sheet, the four-inch creature writhed and squirmed.

Tommy considered what to do with it. If he threw it in the trash or toilet, it might desire revenge and return. He might burn it, but he did not have the time to do so, nor would his mother approve of him lighting a fire. He would have to contain it somehow. Not daring to let it out of his sight, he cautiously picked it up with the edge of his thumb and index finger, went to the kitchen as it convulsed in his clutch, found a zip-lock baggy and sealed it in. Running out of time, he threw the baggy in his top drawer, frantically put on and laced his shoes, and went to school.

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It was the first time Theresa ever folded Tom's underwear, or any men's underwear for that matter. She refolded them two different ways before deciding to take one from the drawer to use as an example. As she pulled out one of the few briefs left in stock, she noticed the little baggy leaning against the back. Curious, she took it out and wondered about the dark brown hair inside. Hoping to divine a clue, she opened the baggy, stuck her fingers in, and rolled the lock between her finger pads. Too thin and dry to belong to a beautiful girl she calculated. She paused to consider asking Tom about the strange memento. The relationship was still very new, and she didn't want to complicate it by making him think that she was snooping. She came to the conclusion that there was no need to be jealous, and that if it were important enough, he would eventually tell her in his own time. Feeling reassured, she absentmindedly slid her thumb and index finger along the open end of the bag. Not noticing that it failed to align and reseal, she replaced the bag back to its original spot in the back of the drawer.

Moments after the drawer was closed, the imprisoned hair sprang to life. Senselessly squirming at first, it soon inched itself toward the opening of the unsealed baggy. After escaping the stale air of its prison, it twisted and tightened, contracted and swelled, contracted and swelled again and again, until it grew to double its original size. It then unraveled and split into two, equal in thickness and length. The two then parted ways, one falling behind the drawer to find another drawer containing Tom's white undershirts and settling into one of the shirt's breast pockets, the other squeezing and wiggling through the dresser's thin crack to the outside, to finally fall on the floor. As a method of motility it bent itself into three simple parts, a crease in the rear and front to act as feet, the middle straightening out to reach forward with the front foot, and then arching to reunite the rear foot with the front.

It crawled in this manner until it was under his bed, where it repeated its replication procedure of contraction and swelling. One half stayed under the bed, while the other inched out of the room to the bathroom, where it replicated again. One stayed behind in the bathroom, while the other moved on to the next room. This routine repeated until every room in the house had its own rat-tail.

Unbeknownst to Tom, he slipped on the T-shirt containing the recently duplicated, liberated hair and set out for his trip to the office. During the car-ride, the hair replicated itself inside Tom's pocket quietly and slowly to avoid detection. One half spilled itself out of the pocket, hidden by Tom's untucked dress-shirt, and falling onto his belt, crawled onto the car seat, inched to the seat's edge, and fell under it. The other half waited until Tom arrived at his destination and sat down at his desk. Tom's shirt was tucked then, but it slid easily between the shirt's plackets that folded when Tom slouched. As if the rat-tail instinctively knew how to avoid Tom's perception, it tumbled to the floor and crawled into the shadows of the cubicle's furniture. There, it began to replicate.

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A few months passed, a lot had happened to Tom. A job promotion, a pregnancy, and soon after, an engagement to Theresa. Meanwhile, the rat-tails had multiplied many times over, hiding in and filling up every dark corner of every room that Tom had ever occupied.

Several times Tom would think he saw something moving, creeping in the darkness, but shine a light and nothing would be there ... only some scattered body hair left by Tom, no doubt. Often he would angle his hand mirror to see how much bigger his bald spot was getting.

Tom was starting to become aware of a constant uneasy feeling; at home, at work, and in the drive between the two. He tried to ignore it, but became wearisome in his effort of self-control. Furthermore, he could not get his rejuvenating sleep, as his discomfort prevented him from passing out. Often he would toss in bed, struggling to pass out. In a few moments of surrender, he would open his eyes and look up. Too dark to discern, several rat-tails were crawling in a circle above him on the ceiling. To Tom, the ceiling seemed to be pulsating above him, as if he could see the black and gray, circular brushless strokes of an abstract painter. The motion made him nauseous, but something else about it bothered him ... he just couldn't ascertain what it was.

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Several more months passed. Tom was now married, his wife was close to full term. Tom's mental state had declined. He was finding it extremely difficult to concentrate on his work, he couldn't stay present for his wife's conversations, and his driving became so automatic that he had

only narrowly escaped three accidents in the span of two months. His delirium caused him to stop noticing the little things. He'd be oblivious to the bits of trash he'd drop on the floor, causing his very swollen wife to either dramatically bend down, or yell at Tom for his carelessness. He would forget where he put his keys, and then wouldn't see them if they were right in front of him. Theresa firmly banned him from the kitchen after the wine-bottle crash, popcorn kernel drop, and oven-mitt fire. Tom started to struggle with reading; he could see the words, but they were meaningless to him. To compensate at his job, he learned to recognize the shape and color of his company's standard documents and simply filled in the blanks, often misspelling his clients' names.

Later on, just a few weeks before his baby's due date, Tom started seeing creeping movements in his periphery, everywhere he went. He couldn't discern what they were, but never gave them a second thought. He always either had more important business to attend to, or was too fatigued to care. The edges of the walls at home began to flutter, parts of his car's dash were swimming, edges of the cubicles and the aisles of his office floor throbbed, the outlines of the tools on his desk vibrated. At the insistence of his wife Tom saw a doctor, but the psychiatrist secretly had no clue as to Tom's ailment or treatment. Every visit the doctor would label him with a new, somewhat believably apt, clinical term and prescribed an additional ineffective drug. The psychiatrist was not interested in finding a cure, but a way to prolong Tom's dependency on him and the medications he was prescribing.

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About a year after Tom's baby Jack was born, Tom no longer recognized himself in the mirror. He didn't recognize much of anything. He mostly got along by habit and relied on a subconscious effort to maneuver himself through the day. His wife's attitude capriciously oscillated between losing her temper with Tom for his carelessness and defending her husband as a spent provider. The remaining friends he had left, the most patient, had grown accustomed his vacant personality. Unable to cognitively perceive them, the rat-tails lost all fear of detection and crawled openly in Tom's presence. In fact, many of them ceased to be single entities, but intertwined together to become a current, and in some places an ocean, of hair.

Recently, Tom was finding it difficult to breathe. A blanket of the hair constantly covered the doors and windows, separating only to let Tom, his family, and his visitors through. He was

beginning to forget what daylight and the blue sky looked like. The hair formed tunnels whenever he went outside; between his walk from the house to the car, the car to his office, even a stroll in the neighborhood. It even blocked out the windows of his car. Tom's languorous condition made it easy for the hair to take control of the wheel and pedals to safely transport him to wherever he intended to go.

One day, upon his return home, Tom found little Jacky in the living room with his toys strewn across the floor. However, the baby was ignoring the plastic artifacts. Instead, he was playing in a pillow of hair; rolling in it, throwing it, giggling and laughing. At that moment, Tom felt a spark between his feelings of repugnance and his urge to fight. In a panic he ran toward the baby to pick it up and deliver it from the monster, to take it far, far away ... but it was too late. A storm of hair rose from the floor, a swarm of hair fell from the ceiling, and covered Tom entirely. It wrapped around his arms and legs, torso and head, binding him, freezing his entire body. In his current stance he would have fallen if it weren't for the hair holding him erect. Tom tried to yell, but the hair immediately covered his mouth. Tom struggled, but it was no use. His lungs became desperate and yearned for air, burning inside his chest. With wide eyes, Tom impotently watched as Jacky gaily rolled in the hairy beast, until everything faded to black.

