

# SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

## RADIANT

***Robin Reinach***

My true color is red: fire engine red, stoplight red, lipstick red, wine, brick, cherry, blood red. As a child, I had furious fiery hair, coarse and curly, a short clipped frizzy hedge around my face, a crimson Brillo pad, a carrotty Jew-fro. Other kids teased me unmercifully, "Bozo, Bozo the clown, what's the matter with your hair?" At the Lenox School for Girls, I hung out on the fringe of my class, not exactly outcast, but mere rung above. I knew better than to try joining the popular girls on the jungle gym in Central Park and risk their taunting and rejection. The red bush set me apart, the bane of my existence, source of all sorrows. My classmates had smooth hair that rippled gently in the breeze, but mine was impervious to hurricane gales. At home I put pajama tops over the frizzy mess and played "normal girl," swishing my head till the pajama arms swayed the way I thought pigtails would.

Other girls wore red and pink, but even on weekends when I escaped the navy tunic that was the Lenox uniform, my closet only offered blue and green. I begged my mother for red dresses, red coats, little red shoes. In Saks Fifth Avenue, she said inanely, "If you were a little girl with blue hair, I would buy you a red dress." Mom had brown hair which entitled her to wear any color, but red didn't look good on redheads, she said. I was sentenced to the boredom of her taste, and blamed her for making me different from other girls. Mom wouldn't let me straighten my hair or grow it long enough to pull back in a ponytail. "It's too wild to grow," she insisted, incapable of handling the unruly red mop as she was the rest of me.

I turned off to my physical self, shot out the top of my head whenever possible, lived beside myself in an out-of-body experience, as if my brain resided in a small box near my head. At best, I rode my body like a horseman, sitting on my own shoulders, steering the vehicle I had somehow gotten stuck going through life with. Often I managed to forget how I looked, but the sense of my clumsiness and peculiarity was harder to lose. Despite being second smallest in my school class, I felt oversized and ungainly. My hands and head seemed too large; my thighs spread white and mushy with blue veins that showed through the thin skin when I sat down, and the back of my neck was always sweaty.

When Mom complained the school uniform was wool and required expensive dry cleaning, I blamed myself for getting it dirty. The soiled tunics I frequently wore to school marked me with cooties, even in my own mind. While Mom wore mink coats and heavy gold jewelry, I had knee socks that lost their

elasticity and fell to my ankles around scuffed loafers with bent down backs. My mirror reflection was a fresh shock each time it caught me.

While I hated my physical self, there were people who thought I looked cute. Walking down the streets of Manhattan, little old ladies often stopped my mother to compliment her on my hair color. She would let them run their fingers through the scarlet bush, or pat the pouffy top of my head. How I hated these garrulous pedestrians and fumed while they petted me, vowing never to expose my own future children to unwanted strokes from strangers. I made many silent self promises in those days about what I would do when I was older.

In my teens I began to make good on those oaths, first and foremost with a professional hair straightening. By my early twenties I wielded a blow-dryer with expertise, and the flaming red mane began to fade. Not quite strawberry blond, but no longer crimson, shoulder length and laden with conditioner, the bright tresses weren't hateful anymore, but attractive. I was however allergic to water. No impromptu swims, no walks in the rain; I stayed dry as a cat, as the Wicked Witch of the West in danger of losing her powers. Beneath a thin veneer of styling lay my true hair, always ready to spring out and reveal my secret identity: screaming red, roaring red, red hot, caught red-handed. I wore bright red nail polish and red high heels, dyed my pale eyebrows and lashes blue-black. I got the appearance thing down to a science, layering on compensations until I was above reproach like Caesar's wife, 100% cootie free.

Only perfection offered protection against the sweaty-palmed, frizzy haired, soiled and chubby child that lurked in my memory. Red-faced, she peered out from behind a curtain of smooth shining hair. Red-named, little Robin Rose didn't hide as we went through life together, but waited for the moment when she could tug my manicured hand with her clammy one and remind me to be a better mother than the one we'd shared. It took ten years to acknowledge that pull without cringing and longer still, despite years of therapy, to embrace the curly carrot top within.

