

5-1-1995

Hair

Katherine Williams

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Katherine (1995) "Hair," *Forces*: Vol. 1995 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol1995/iss1/26>

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HAIR

Katherine Williams

The comb snags again on the tangles, and she yanks the blue plastic so hard it snaps in two. She looks at the handle still clutched in her fingers, at the tines of the comb sticking out of Ruthie's blonde hair like a severed hand, at Ruthie's face screwed up in tears in the mirror.

"Well, if you had't gone swimmin' without your cap this wouldn't of happened. I told you before, Ruthie, your hair's too thin to let it just float around in the chlorine like that." She knows; she's a beautician, and she's seen it all before. Not a hair designer or a scalp technician (whatever that was, anyway), or even a hair stylist, she tells her customers. Just a plain old beautician, like her mother before her. So she knows what she's talking about when she tells her daughter "Next time, you wear a cap or I'll chop it all off; I will"!

She plucks the broken comb out of Ruthie's hair and throws it in the pink plastic trash can in the corner, then digs another comb out of the drawer. Janie knows Ruthie's heard it all before, but it bothers her that her daughter ignores her, watches her in the mirror with her eyes narrowed like a sneaky cat's. She thinks Ruthie doesn't care, only grows her hair long because Janie likes it like that, likes to play with the long blonde strands while we watch "Wheel of Fortune" together. Janie would just love to have long hair herself, but hers never grows longer than her chin before it just breaks off, snaps off like raw spaghetti. She works on Ruthie's tangles with the familiarity of long practice, eases them out with bent fingers smelling of permanent waves and hairspray.

"Off you go, now" she says when the last tangle is gone. "Off you go." She watches her daughter bolt from the windowless bathroom, scrawny jack-hammer legs pumping and pounding, heels never hitting the thin carpet. Janie never could run like that, not now, not ever. She's got feet of marble; that's what her mother always said. Like blocks of cold gray marble, stuck on the bottoms of her legs.

She hears the front door slam, hears Ruthie and the next door neighbor's kids run down the block, their bare feet slapping the pavement like wet hands on a baby's butt. Nope, never could run like that, she thinks, and pulls the tangles from the tines of the comb; opens the drawer and takes out the plastic bag full of years of Ruthie's tangles, matted and multihued like a hand-braided rug. She's saved every one, only God knows why. She keeps telling herself she'll know why someday, but she never tells anyone about the bag, not even Ruthie. Keeps it hidden in the back of the drawer and pulls it out only when she's alone.

Janie leans back against the wall, looks at herself in the mirror. It's been another hard week: three customers canceled last minute, left her sitting around with nothing to do but shoot the breeze with Angie the fingernail lady, and that always depresses her. Angie only works when she wants to. She's pretty and young and has a husband with a good job and no kids, and she grows her perfect nails long and keeps them painted all the time. Janie holds up her hands, eyes them in the mirror. They're rough and red, and the knuckles are swollen like insect galls in the oak tree outside the bedroom window. All those perms are making me ugly, she thinks, can't hardly bend my fingers anymore. She looks again at her face, lined like the silted delta of a personal river. "Damn Angie," she says out loud, "She don't know anything." Her voice bounces back at her out of the mirror and sounds old in her ears, old and tired, and she leaves the close-smelling room in a hurry, not even bothering to turn out the lights.

Janie walks down the hall, steps over Ruthie's Suzy Q, life-sized, battery-operated doll with the eyes that move and the voice that sounds like a drowning cat, heads for the kitchen for a Coke, then stops for some reason and picks up the doll. She never could stand the thing. It reminds her, for some reason, of hot, humid Mondays and stale, hard bread, but it was Ruthie's favorite. Used to be she never went anywhere without Suzy Q. Now Ruthie's got her attention on some glamorized Barbie with a bust that Janie would kill to have and loud clothes that cost too much. Suzy Q spends most of the time under Ruthie's bed, except for once in a while when her daughter drags it out to show her friends how she can make the doll roll its eyes up into its empty head and say "Mama"! in a surprised, underwater sort of way whenever Ruthie swats it on the butt. Suzy Q is always good for a laugh, now and then.

Looking at the doll in her hands, Janie can't help but notice that the poor thing's hair (she laughed when she first saw the box: "Practically the Real Thing"!) is in tangles again, rubber bands half-pulled out, and isn't that gum embedded next to its pink plastic scalp? She presses her nose down next to the doll's head, sniffs. Yep, Juicy Fruit. Janie frowns, turns around, heads back to the bathroom for the comb.

She squats on the floor, stuffs Suzy Q's head between her knees, and jams the comb she used on Ruthie's hair into the mess. Nope, comb won't work. Ruthie's really done a job this time, she thinks. She reaches under the counter, pulls out the conditioner, pours half the bottle over the doll's head, then tries the comb again. Still no luck. Those tangles are there to stay. Gonna have to cut the gum out anyway. She opens the drawer next to her head, grabs the scissors.

Now she hesitates. Ruthie wouldn't like her doing this, she knows, wouldn't like it at all, but then she thinks, who's the beautician here anyway? and starts to cut. The scissors make little private clicking sounds, like a small dog's nails on lino, or her mother's old wind-up alarm clock. Janie thinks of her mother, snipping and cutting her way through forty-three years of hair, forty-three years of inhaling chemicals and cigarette smoke waved in her face, so many years it almost makes her dizzy to think of it. She frowns again. Cutting the gum out's gonna leave a hole in Suzy's long, frizzy hair, but it can't be helped now, can it? Damn it, Ruthie, damn doll cost a month's worth of tips, you know.

She snips again, watches the gum and synthetic red hair fall to the bathroom floor, and poor Suzy looks like she's going bald in one spot, just like Mama did after the chemo. Can't leave her like that. She looks odd, so just cut a

bit here, snip a bit there. Ruthie'll never notice if I do it just right, she thinks. But the more she snips, the worse Suzy looks, like her head got caught in the blender, and Janie's frowning all the time now. She can't leave her like this. She's a beautician, dammit, she's supposed to know how to make things better; it's her job, and the scissors click and snip and click and snip, and suddenly Janie realizes Suzy's got no hair left, not a one. Her head's as bald as Mama's on the day she died, pink and bald and shiny as a well-used doorknob. She drops the scissors on the floor and stares and stares, and then she's holding Suzy Q tight to her chest, and the tears are just coming. She can't stop them. They come and come and come until she's all dried up. She's got no more left. She gives them all to Ruthie's poor little bald doll, and Suzy Q just soaks them right up, like a pink sponge curler on a customer's head.

When she finally gets herself back together again, she looks at the mess on the floor, at Suzy all wet and smelling of perms and saltwater, at her tired old face in the mirror, at the blue halves of the broken comb in the pink trash can. She puts the doll down and opens the drawer again, reaches back behind the used-up makeup and the worn-down hairbrushes until her fingers find the bag of Ruthie's tangled hair. She scoops up Suzy Q's butchered hair, picks up every single one, and carefully puts them all in the bag, the fake reds and little girl blondes mixing together like fire, or a muddy river running out to sea, or maybe like the colors in the hair dye she used to brew for herself not very long ago, before she went bald, too.

Interview with **Brendan Quigley**, THEATRE INSTRUCTOR.

QUESTION: HOW DO YOU WORK WITH AMBITIOUS STUDENTS TO NURTURE THEIR TALENTS?

"I LOOK FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE EAGER TO LEARN — IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE HERE THEN DON'T BE HERE — HANG OUT AT THE MALL. THERE ARE 43,000,000 PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE ACTORS [SO] DETERMINATION, DRIVE, AND DESIRE ARE NEEDED, BECAUSE THIS IS POSSIBLY THE TOUGHEST BUSINESS IN THE WORLD TO BE IN.

SOME STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN STAGE MANAGEMENT, LIGHTING, [STAGE] DESIGN, SOUND DESIGN, OR ANY OF THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS. WE HAVE SOME VERY TALENTED STUDENTS FOR WHOM THAT IS THEIR FOCUS.

I GET MORE SATISFACTION PUTTING ON A PRODUCTION HERE THAN PUTTING ON AN ELEVEN-TRUCK TOUR."