

"If only he'd get a haircut," the geography teacher heard someone whisper as the class ended, and was as startled as if someone had made a direct accusation. But it was nothing: the usual gang of students pushing through the desks to leave the classroom as soon as possible, like every day, and the giggle that followed was now their own business. He forgot immediately, returned two chalk stubs to their box and wiped the blackboard, leaving only the word "geodesics", underlined twice, and finally even that disappeared under a whitish residue. Eleven o'clock. He had time to walk back calmly. But, on the pavement, the accusation and the giggle came back, like a secret message, and he ran his hands over the top of his head: yes, I need a haircut, he thought, and then without thinking entered the Unisex Hair Salon that had opened two blocks away from his home – in the past few days he had walked past it and daydreamed about entering, about the futuristic setting, those beautiful girls, that tall, androgynous, slim figure managing the team with his spiky hair, all of it behind a window that left the laboratory – it looked like a laboratory – exposed for everyone to see.

He entered and immediately regretted it, faced by the smiling black-clad figure that gave him no time to retreat and pointed with a kind gesture, gently touching his shoulder, this way; and it seemed like a trap, because there, in the brazenly modern chairs – he recalled the designs from "The Jetsons", their floating, fluid and comical shapes – were two horrendous ladies, one with a white facial mask that looked like drying plaster, cracking around a pair of aggressive eyes and a hardened mouth, part woman part statue; and the other with hair painted in black tint that ran down her wrinkled forehead like an inky fringe, and both gave him accusing looks, gleaming, even furious, what is that man doing here, he imagined then thinking as he turned away, only to find a smiling girl with no makeup, possessed of a charm that was at once homely, transparent and absurd, like a happy schoolgirl, who pointed to one of the futuristic chairs, Sit here, sir, her arm extended. He almost slid off as he took a seat, once again feeling he was trapped, the chair leaning back like the ones at the dentist, and he imagined the cold light on the teeth, the scientist-like face assessing the damaged mouth, now the whole body tense, arms against the chair's armrests, the hands gripping tight, until the girl's fingers pulled up his neck with unexpected delicacy, fit-



ting it into a rubber collar that weighed his head down – now he was staring straight at the white ceiling, drawing in his mind a map that connected the six – no, seven – randomly placed lamps, but he closed his eyes, giving in to the proceedings; with a careful adjustment, the girl's fingers retrieved the reluctant hairs still caught in the rubber collar, so that only his neck would remain there, but he should relax, the girl's face, now so close to his, seemed to be saying, Are you comfortable, sir?, a question that seemed truly interested in the answer, and he nodded a diminutive yes barely opening and closing his eyes, as if to avoid spoiling the lightness of the comfort brought about by the gentle and attentive voice – and he felt like the cape the girl was now unfolding covered him by the wind's force rather than by the agency of her hands, but he stopped thinking about it, eyes closed, waiting for the next step.

Without warning, save for a brief squeal that he did not even try to decipher, he felt the suddenness of the warm water filtering into his hair and with it the fingers that seemed to unravel it into separate strands, and he finally understood the use of the rubber collar around the neck, which stopped water from running down his body, kept things separate, the collar was a dike between head and body, and he imagined a diagram on the blackboard, tsunami, he would say, drawing waves with the chalk – and now he felt the shampoo foam, the hair sliding through the fingers as if it were dripping, and when he heard Is the temperature ok, sir? he offered the same diminutive yes fearing that something would change in that moment of intense pleasure that made him hold his breath; more than the fingers (although them too), he felt the delicate touch of the nails, slow, drawing parallel lines on his hardened scalp (he smiled intimately at the image, which merely in being conjured seemed to open a new door in his life), the toughened skin, the subtle edge of the nails, the hands touching him with a total and innocent intimacy by which the gliding scratches spread across his body in spasms, twinges brief like – and again he pictured a diagram on the blackboard, the mental map of a naked and asexual body (but with an old-fashioned pointy moustache beneath the nose, as in a nineteenth century engraving, which made him laugh to himself again, that was funny, the lightness of the nails washing his hair) and the trails leading from the roots of his hair to some point on his body like dotted aerial routes on a map or a scientific demonstration of the effects of acupuncture, in which he finally seemed to believe with some apprehension. A doubting Thomas faced with concrete proof, the incredible presence of those fingers and nails tangling in his hair with the dense foam and the warm water, here and there more intensely



and slower, like someone seeking a grain of sand, though never aggressively, creating an epiphany that radiated through him like nothing he had ever felt in his life (a thought that almost deprived him of his current pleasure, like someone confronted by an obstacle made insurmountable by lack of precedents, an incomprehensible novelty), a pleasure that took over his entire body and then filled his soul, and which he would never dare take to its ultimate physical consequences, or simply the logical or obvious ones, such as, for instance – and he tried to remember the face of the girl washing his hair with such care, gentleness and wisdom, but he forgot, distracted by a fragment of melody that someone (perhaps even her, to judge from the sound's proximity) started whistling before falling silent again, and he was anxious to remember the lyrics to that popular piece of well-known music that now scurried away from him like an insect in the dark – now he could only hear a hair dryer in the next-door room, and the teacher thought that perhaps he was the reason for the silence, as if they were all reading his mind, as long as he was there life would be suspended in anticipation of his departure, but he had not time to feel anxious, because the girl shut off the water and replaced the pressure of the rubber collar with the softness of a towel protecting his neck, the delicate fingers pressing into the towel, so that his shirt wouldn't get wet. He seemed to wake up.

– Is that it?

She nodded yes, smiling, perhaps at the absurdity of the question, and took him to a room where the manager with spiky hair, cartoon-thin, waited with scissors in hand, also smiling, saying something he could not hear while the girl pulled the towel off him and covered him with another cape as he sat in a chair, upright this time, and then disappeared – he remained in front of the mirror, staring at himself starkly, the formless hair trickling down his head as if at the end of a party and he laughed to himself again. I am Dinorei, said the hairdresser, practical and polite. How would you like your hair cut, sir?, he asked, the comb carefully parting the hair at the top of the head, and the teacher pulled a face, almost tutting, whatever, he seemed to be saying, and that was really what he was thinking, whatever, all he wanted was to take with him the fingers and the nails and the foam and the warm water and the subtle web of touch that he did not want to lose, and he closed his eyes again. When he opened them, Dinorei was holding a small mirror behind his neck, left side, right side, left again, right again, so he could verify through that game of duplicate images the quality of the haircut, which was perfect, he concluded, getting up from the chair and putting his hand into his pocket



to pay, already on his way out. It cost four times more than what he usually paid his old barber, but he didn't complain: he wanted to be on the street immediately, and once outside he felt the strange lightness of his head, his hair short like never before, as if his body were missing something – for a moment he tried to anticipate what the students would say. He took a few steps and unexpectedly remembered the lyrics to the interrupted whistling – *“Debaixo dos caracóis de seus cabelos”* – and further ahead crossed the road, entered the building, climbed the stairs and opened the door to his flat whistling the song but stuck on those two first verses like they were an enigma that needed deciphering, the old vinyl record stuck in a groove, beneath the curls, pause, of your hair, and then the emptiness of memory.

The woman, listening to the thread of his whistle, raised her eyes from the book she was reading when he entered the living room, adjusted her eyeglasses to see him in the distance, and smiled, either at the fragment of song or at his new haircut, but did not say the obvious thing he expected, You cut your hair?, or that perhaps she had thought of asking as she opened her lips, before something more urgent changed her line of thought:

– I left a plate ready for you in the microwave. I need to leave soon. – Her eyes went back to the book, which she closed immediately, in one sudden motion. – You took your time – she said, less as a complaint than stating a simple fact.

He felt a diffuse irritation. He sat in front of her and thought about saying, clearly, with the weight of a solemn announcement, or an eviscerated verse that has to be confessed, Today I was touched like you never touched me – but he kept quiet. Standing at the washbasin in front of the bathroom mirror he examined his hair, now with heightened attention, his almost aggressive fingers digging into it; too short, he murmured with a touch of distaste, calculating with a glimmer of hope how long it would be before he needed to return for another haircut.

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