

Bad Hair

Caitlin Cawley

SUSAN BARON WAS in kindergarten when she learned she had bad hair.

It was September 22, 1964, picture day in the small town of Hopewell, Pennsylvania. Sue was just waking up, but she could already sense her mother's worry. Now her mother always worried—about the folks on the other side of town, about driving to the department store, about overcooking the pot roast, about whether Dad would be tired or angry when he got home from the VFW—but this was a new worry, one that little Sue did not recognize.

“We don't want you looking like a ragamuffin today, Susie,” her mother repeated in her sweet voice while intently surveying the drawer of handed-down dresses.

Sue was not sure what ragamuffin meant exactly, but she could tell by her mother's wide eyes and compulsive nodding that she did not want to be one.

After dressing in the jumper her mother laid out and giving her tiny teeth, as she had been instructed, an extra good brushing, Sue made her way downstairs. Her dad had already left for work, someone's hot water tank needed emergency repair, and her two older brothers had scarfed down their scrambled eggs so they could wrestle outside before reporting to the nuns for school. But Sue's mother and big sister Nancy were waiting in the kitchen.

Mom's face was nervous, but Nancy's was eager. She had a wild look in her eyes. Nancy was only two years older than Sue, but somehow she knew everything. She knew how to read chapter books and that she was going to be a famous detective and how to multiply numbers. *She definitely knows what a ragamuffin is*, Sue thought.

“Sit down, Susie, come, come,” Nancy motioned toward the chair. It was clear there was no way out, so Sue took a seat at the kitchen table next to an operating station of hair spray, combs, bottles, and all sorts of unfamiliar gadgets. They began to style her short, mousey bob. Sue could not understand what the big fuss was about, but she didn't ask questions. The procedure seemed too important to Mom and Nancy.

They brushed and tugged at her thin, straggly strands, Nancy directing their mother who listened carefully to the eight-year-old's orders.

“First, we need to put in LOTS of Dippidy Do Da. Then, we make the spit curls. Then, we hold them in place with bobby pins. Yes, exactly!” Nancy could not contain her glee.

As they gelled and curled, Sue started to imagine what it would look like when they were done. Shirley Temple or her neighbor Barb, she concluded, feeling a ripple of excitement.

They took out the curls. There would be no brushing. Her hair was “much too flat for that.” Just hair spray and out the door.

Waiting in line to have her picture taken, Sue noticed something about her classmate Marcy. Marcy had black, shiny hair that had been styled with thick, bouncy curls. She realized that Marcy’s hair was what Nancy and Mom wanted hers to look like.

Does my hair look like that? How could it? Sue could feel her cheeks turning red, and suddenly noticed a hole in her jumper. *Has that always been there*, she wondered?

Sue tried her best to smile when the man took her picture, but she could not stop thinking about her cheeks and Marcy and Mom and Nancy and the hole and the strands of hair falling flat against her head and, finally, the inevitable fact, *I have bad hair*.

It was around this time that Sue began to wear a turtleneck on her head. She would wear it like a headband so that the shirt, resembling long tresses, would cascade down her back. She preferred her black turtleneck for this, but when it was in the wash any color would do. Sue would walk around the house wearing her cotton locks most evenings and no one would say a word. It was as though she really had long, thick, luminous hair.

A year passed and picture day was upon them once again, but this time Sue was six.

Sue did not want her Mom to fret about her hair and she wanted it to look like the other girls this time, so she decided to take matters into her own hands. She got a pair of scissors from the sewing box and locked herself in the upstairs bathroom. As she prepared her styling station, she envisioned what it would look like, but more than that, she imagined her family’s reaction. Her father would look up from rolling a cigarette, the boys would stop wrestling, her mom would clasp her hands against her heart with a big Donna Reed smile. Together, they would applaud and think, *Sue is a beauty!* Even Nancy would offer an approving nod.

After a few snips, she realized the bangs were not what she had envisioned. It wasn’t particularly good but perhaps no one would notice.

“What did you do!” Nancy screamed.

SUE GREW FROM a shy little thing with a gawky smile, twig limbs, and, of course, terrible hair into a poised young woman with a glowing complexion, modelesque physique, and, most important, a blow dryer and curler.

During college, she fell in love and learned heartbreak. After college, she fell in love again, but this time, she fell in love with the man she would marry.

It was October 8, 1982, Sue's wedding day. Her bridesmaids had already left for the church, but her mother and father were waiting in the street with the car. Sue was still inside, locked in Nancy's upstairs bathroom. Her hair was not right.

"If you don't come down right now, I am not going to that church a minute later!" Her dad yelled in the direction of the bathroom window.

He was a man of few words, and since they were young, he only ever unleashed his gravel bark on Nancy, David, and Robert, never on Sue. She thought that her parents might really leave, and maybe it was just as well. The year 1982 was an unforgiving time for bad hair, and Sue, at twenty-seven years old, was overcome by a new weight, a sense of enormity, as *marriage* became more real with every passing second.

Recurling a strand that was already distorted and hard with product, she looked in the mirror, *What am I doing?*

It was a question she felt abstractly but deeply, like a pulse, staring back at her eyes, her skin, her mouth, herself—familiar and curious.

Sue closed her eyes and held them shut. When she opened them, it was back to the task at hand. Her hair would not get any better, she determined. It was good enough. It was time to go. When she arrived at the church on the top of Pittsburgh's Mount Washington, she saw the man she loved. A gust of wind blew her hair in the warm October sun.

SUE CAWLEY BECAME A MOTHER of three girls who adored her and finally found the perfect hairstyle. Meg Ryan and Oprah Winfrey made the flipped-out, high-volume shag *the* hairstyle of the late nineties, and the short, layered look suited Sue perfectly. It made her bad hair seem good, even great, until time or heat or cold or wind would suck the carefully crafted body out of each strand and leave it flat against her skull.

It was January 14, 1996, the baptism of a close friend's son. Outside it was bitterly cold, but beams of light were streaming through the stained glass windows of the gothic cathedral. Sue and

her husband Jerry had left the girls with Jerry's parents in Connecticut so they could drive to Philadelphia for the day. Jerry was the godfather and Margaret's sister was the godmother—although Margaret would always tell Sue that she was the “you know” in her heart.

It was a strange day. Margaret's sister was suffering from a severe eating disorder, a painful shock to everyone. At barely one hundred pounds, holding the baby through the christening seemed like an impossible request. Both the regular organists had called out sick, so the music was provided by a single soprano. Her lone voice echoed through the cavernous corners of the granite cathedral, creating an eerie stillness. The priest had decided, for reasons Sue could not discern, that it was a good Sunday for a sermon about abortion, and not just a sermon regurgitating Catholic jargon about the value to human life. He had prepared a fire-and-brimstone condemnation meant to make every person who found themselves in church that Sunday feel like they were sitting in purgatory and their future was bleak.

“Those of you who do not stand up and say killing an innocent child is wrong are just as guilty!” Two women got up and left the church. “And those of you who do not try to stop this act are sinners complicit in murder!”

Despite everything going on around her, Sue was distracted. Something was different. She could sense every strand of hair on her head as though they were individual loose threads. It was a heightened sensitivity that seemed relegated to the realm of drug-induced trips and fresh fleshy wounds.

The next morning, it was time. Sue turned on the shower and let the water get warm. Then, like a soldier faced with a line in the sand, asked to choose his fate, she crossed the threshold. The moment the water hit her head, it all came off, the way a gust of wind can leave a dandelion naked in a field.

Standing in the shower, with chunks of hair laying around her feet and clinging to her curves, she ran her hands over her head. *I'm still alive*, she realized, almost able to smile at the thought.

She let the warm water rush over her skin, taking in this new sensation, letting herself, just for a moment, feel it as freedom. She turned off the water and wrapped a towel around her bald head. She cleaned up her hair with paper towels and threw it away. She did not take time that morning to study her new self. There were three young girls who needed to get to school.

In the coming months, breast cancer and chemotherapy showed Sue dark moments.

But she survived.

And her bad hair grew back.