
THE CUT

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As the sun's light began to fade, Pia found herself in the master bathroom on the second story of her four-bedroom, recently renovated suburban home. Nothing littered the spotless countertop and she didn't want to make a mess; the bathroom had just been cleaned. Facing her reflection in the mirror, Pia's eyes flitted as they scanned her hair. It was dark, thick and ran straight down the middle of her back, faultless. She silently thanked her mother. This would be the third and last time, she thought. All for the sake of long, dark, thick hair. All in the name of beauty.

Now was the time. Shell-shaped and awkward, the sink wasn't big enough. She'd use the tub instead. Walking over to the freestanding bathtub, she alternately turned the hot and cold knobs, wondering how far above ninety-eight degrees would feel too hot. As the water rose, she poured Johnson's Baby Wash into the tub, staring blankly as bubbles formed and skimmed the water's surface. From beneath the vanity sink she pulled out a pink double-bladed, brand new disposable razor and placed it, along with a white washcloth, on the edge of the bathtub. With the tub half full, she turned both knobs right. The hottest of the water rose slowly towards the ceiling, where it hung precariously, toying with the effects of gravity. She reached in to test the water. Perfect, she thought. She undressed herself, leaving her clothes in a neatly folded pile next to the towels on the bench near to the tub. A soft coo from the other room reminded her it was time.

Pia made her way into the adjoining bedroom. From the crib in the corner, her baby girl stared up expectantly. Bits of dark hair spiked up and pointed in various directions, giving the baby a playful look. With round cheeks, small eyes, and few teeth, she resembled most babies. Pia noticed how the diapered baby's muscles twitched as they worked to support the weight of her torso. It had only been a few weeks since she'd learned to sit up steadily on her own. Carefully, Pia bent over, reached out, and drew the baby close to her chest. Natural oils met and meshed as their hot skins touched, responded, and reminded them of their bond. Laying the baby down on the bed near the crib, the child fussed as Pia removed the dirty diaper. She skillfully wiped her off, rolled up the diaper and disposed of it in the deodorized pail.

Pia thought back to the other two times. Each occasion, the result had left her unsatisfied. The third time is supposed to be the last time and things would turn out differently. Back in the bathroom, she briefly straddled the tub's side as she stepped

into the foamy water, baby in arms. Standing in the wake, she watched the baby's mouth match the sounds that met the air as Pia bent her right leg, followed by her left. She found herself kneeling, sitting on her ankles with the baby cradled in the hook formed by her left arm. She reached with her right hand for the washcloth, wet it in the soapy water and began to bathe her.

Beginning at the feet, she feathered the soap between the baby's miniature toes, up her stocky calves, behind her creased knees, and across her round thighs. The washcloth made its way up the baby's soft stomach, in and out of her bellybutton, then around to her back, softly massaging the muscles beneath the smooth skin. When reaching the nape of the neck, Pia reapplied soap and began forming soft circles as she gently scrubbed the baby's scalp. Avoiding her open eyes, Pia worked to soften the pores that held the existing brown strands. Only an inch long, the tufts were short. It was getting dark and thick, but there was room for improvement. The baby shivered and sought the warmth of her mother's body. Pia thought about a day when she'd recount this moment, when her baby would thank her for the effort.

Having formed a frothy wig atop the baby's head, Pia traded the washcloth for the razor. The first time she had begun on the left side, the second time on the right. Now, she'd begin front and center. Placing the razor's edge in line with the child's small and supple nose, Pia grasped the handle with her index finger and thumb before commencing. Locking her wrist, she moved her entire arm from the front of the scalp towards the back, listening as skin met metal. A single valley of rose-tinted scalp revealed itself in between two masses of foam. She exhaled and cooed, calming the restless baby. Satisfaction. Gaining confidence, her movements grew swifter as she moved towards the left edge. Pia reviewed the comical split wig and laughed. The half-sheared baby fidgeted as water droplets caught soap bubbles and stray hair, following the soft form of her face. Pia moved quickly, wiping away any residue before it reached the baby's squinting eyes. She was halfway towards reaching her definition of accomplishment.

Her left arm began to ache underneath the baby's weight as she turned her attention towards the remaining white froth. After rinsing the razor in the now lukewarm water, she continued. Starting at the center once more, she slid the razor towards the posterior part of the head, making sure to catch every hair. Gradually, one wig transformed into the other as the bubbles disappeared and smooth skin displaced any existing fuzz, leaving behind uniformity. As she followed the curve of the right ear, the razor made its final move. The etching stopped and Pia placed the razor back on the tub's edge. She sat the baby in front of her, wrapping her motherly legs behind the baby, making sure she didn't fall backwards. Pia turned the child's head to the left, then to the right as she rinsed off any remaining soap and hair just as gently as she wiped away her daughter's tears. The water now cold, the baby whined.

Only the fading sunlight illuminated the room. The two sat facing each other. One proud. One upset. The baby's skin now unvaryingly smooth and spotless. This was the third and the last time, Pia reminded herself.