

The Creature

The hair, she agreed, had always been a talking point. Long, thick, curly and ginger, it cascaded from an unusually high forehead to cover most of her petite, naked body.

‘You’re nearly forty. Why don’t you try a new style?’

She paused and flashed a look of contempt.

‘Because I’d become a different person.’

‘Different person - what are you talking about? How can hair have that much power?’

‘Easily - for me and just about every other woman I know. Lots of men as well - including you.’

A bald man glowered at me from the dressing table mirror.

‘In your case an acute *absence* of hair is the issue. That hirsute student I met twenty years ago is not the same man I see before me today. You’ve changed.’

‘Rubbish. You’re trying to wind me up. Hair loss hasn’t altered my personality. It’s just the ageing process. I’m still the Sam you married.’

‘Of course you are. But I can’t help feeling that things might have been different had you kept a full head of hair.’

She gathered up and fastened her own substantial locks in one flowing movement, as if to emphasize the put down.

‘What kind of things? Are you saying that our relationship has suffered because of a receding hairline, or that bald men are inferior - or both?’

‘All I’m saying is that hair - or the lack of it - is the most important part of appearance, and appearance counts. Subconsciously, that’s how people make judgements. Why do you think Margaret Thatcher went to all that trouble with her bouffant?’

‘Well, excuse me, but I *appear* to disagree. Clothes are at least as important as hair. And anyway it was Thatcher’s weird voice that everyone remembers.’

‘I’ll prove it to you. Wait there until I get back.’

She jumped off the bed and scrabbled through an old blanket box.

‘Here, try this on. It’s my best Theatre wig.’

A tatty black creature balanced at a cocky angle on her fist.

‘Don’t be ridiculous Dee. I’m not wearing that - no way.’

‘Come on, play the game - humour me for a minute.’

She crept closer with that mischievous smile. The creature settled snugly on my tingling scalp.

‘There you are – perfect. What a transformation!’

‘I don’t feel any different, if that’s what you’re hoping for.’

‘No Sam, you’re missing the point. The new look is about how *other* people feel. I think it really suits you.’

‘New look - what new look? I’m taking this damn thing off.’

She held up both delicate hands in supplication.

‘Hang on, I’ve had an idea. What if we road tested the new look?’

‘Road tested? I’m not a new model on bloody *Top Gear!*’

Half an argumentative hour later I was in the car with Dee and the creature heading towards town. My identity was being fed into a shredding machine. Every red light made me slide lower in the passenger seat.

‘This has to be the most bizarre stunt you’ve ever conned me into.’

‘Nonsense - we’re just undertaking a small social experiment which could produce real personal benefits.’

My head began to boil under the brooding creature. How had I managed to let this happen? I checked the date on my mobile: it wasn’t April first. Dee narrowed down her options for inflicting acute embarrassment.

‘Let me see - Sunday lunchtime - The Red Lion should be a good spot. Bound to be plenty of people you know in the bar.’

We turned off the dual carriageway into a busy car park lined with smokers. I refused to move without further clarification.

‘What exactly are we supposed to be doing?’

‘I’ve told you. We’re testing public reaction to the new improved Sam. Everyone’s going to be amazed.’

‘But what if they don’t recognize me? Or worse, burst out laughing?’

‘Then we think again.’

She yanked open the car door and grabbed my arm, like a chimp handler at London Zoo.

‘Come on, this is *so* exciting.’

We did a tug of war dance into the bar, already heaving at noon. The landlady shouted over a dozen jabbering locals.

‘Usual Sam?’

Somehow it was the most unexpected question I’d ever been asked.

‘Err ... yes ... yes, usual please - and a small white wine - thanks.’

The darts team captain pushed his way through the crowd, looking mean. I half hid behind Dee, hoping he hadn't seen me.

'Two months behind with your subs Sam - make sure you cough up this week.'

I very nearly hugged him. After several more benign contacts, Dee started to gesticulate wildly at the creature, as if trying to spur it into emergency action. Complete strangers were invited to join a bogus conversation about the relative merits of gel and hairspray. A bemused pensioner was bullied into a strong opinion about fringes.

She was clutching at straws. The underwhelming truth was that my newly acquired coiffure hadn't registered on anybody's scale of trivial events. I gulped three pints of best bitter with a stupid grin on my face.

Back in the car, Dee wasn't giving up her noble cause without a fight.

'You know what this proves don't you?'

I was about to give her the killer response when a policeman's surly features appeared in my side window. He had me out, handcuffed and en route to the station before either of us realized what was happening. Two uncomfortable hours later I was led by a young PC into the bleak interview room. Dee was already there, armed with a different, predictable question.

'Why has my husband been arrested?'

The Detective Sergeant looked apologetically at her and pointed to a pile of papers on his desk.

‘Because he matches the description of a bank robber we’ve been after for six years.’

The look of astonishment on Dee’s face quickly dissolved into a fit of giggles. I reached up, took a handful of the coarse, synthetic creature and pulled.