

The Woman with the Hair

by Mia Jones

There's something you should know.

Yes, you, young woman with the hair. The mousy locks you rarely let down, the strands strained in an ever-present bun at the nape of your neck. This is the style you release as rarely as your pride; but now the tresses tumble free, spiralling downwards in the same fashion as your dignity.

Tight clothes, tight-smile. The spotlight is on you, my girl; a world of flashing lights and dazzled faces, blaring music setting the thrumming heartbeat of the city. Let yourself go, my friend: atop these scuffed floors, every maladroit pivot is a pirouette, every gauche swivel a flamenco of the highest order.

Now stop. Cast your eyes around.

No one is watching.

How the alcohol reached your brain? They waltz to their own tune; they are ballerinas within their own little snow domes. Why would they care for your petty display, just as you do not care for theirs?

Your face crumples.

Hush now. Look once more Carefully, closely. I won't ask you again.

Do you see him?

Do you feel the tide kiss your ankles, cold as death?

Do you remember?

Gold and blue, the hues of your childhood: sand and sea, sky and sun. Snug in your skin as a little girl, arms blistering and hair tousling.

You dashed into the water, hitching knees high from the icy spray. An insistent whine calls from the shore; your mother, already fading into the background like a bad dream. Calling for you. Wanting you back.

Have you forgotten her already?

Do you remember?

You, wading into the soupy humidity of the city, as if bathing in delusion. With a sloppy hand, you adjusted your façade of blitheness, the cliché of happy-go-lucky youth you hoped to masquerade. I know you shivered at the tang of illicitness, saccharine in your mouth, as you traded sensible skirts for a much higher cut; jerked your mother's clasp from your hair and left it on the floor.

The city, drawing you in like a tide: the forbidden sea.

Do you remember?

Your mother calls from the shore. She wants you safe.

The pulsating life of the nightclub as you tiptoed inside, high heels clacking a staccato of hesitation?

The tide sucks about your ankles; no longer welcoming. It's drawing back, folding in on itself.

Taunting you. Inviting you deeper, so the tide can rise in a flash and swallow you whole.

The man leering from the corner, face swathed in shadow?

She wants you safe.

The silent catcall of that smirk, the black intent in his eyes?

You're not safe.

Upon that lacklustre dance floor, you freeze. The glow in your chest evaporates. Humidity descends like a soaking coat of mail.

My dear, listen closely: turn and scuttle. Keep your breath bated against pursuit.

The tide drags back, like the sheet from a corpse. An autopsy of your poise and pride. It withdraws with a sigh, and the rocks are exposed. They are teeth. Daggers.

Did he follow you?

You're not safe.

Look behind you.

"Don't look behind you! You'll fall!"

The voice rose to sugary heights, hitting all the pitches formulaic in gently rebuking a child. The girl whipped her head back to face the front, feeling the world plummet around her can her insides somersault.

The woman behind the swing began laughing, as if the sharp tangle of notes was infectious and would grip the girl in a raging fever of hysteria. Eyes downcast, the girl only gripped the ropes tighter and closer her ears to the sound. The childish game of a swing seemed to be a gambit to keep the woman entertained: a role reversal that curdled the bright sunshine sour.

Stony-faced, the girl stared at her surroundings (or the rest of the park?): the sensible couples, picnicking families. She felt like she was pressing her nose against a piece of art, praying to fall through the glass.

Suddenly, the swing slowed beneath her mother's hands.

"What's wrong, darling?"

The weight of her mother's eyes could break bone. The girl carefully wiped her face of expression, but her throat began to close.

"This is fun, isn't it? Isn't it, honey?"

Her cheeks burned with the heat of lies brewing on her tongue.

*The woman's fingers began to tremble, clutching the swing ropes like a lifeline. Something was caving inside her; something only buoyed by the
(soupy humidity of delusion)*

sturdy reassurance of a child.

"I love you, you know." The words were taut and quivering.

Silence.

"Remember that," she whispered, and her voice broke.

The girl turned towards her, and

the man is there.

Oh yes, my dear, he is there; silhouetted against the pulsing disco lights, draped in a cloak of dusky shadow.

When the tide crawls back to its den, the rocks come out to play. A little girl in the big bad city - when the thrill of independence evaporates, what then? When the tide goes out, what happens?

The rocks are exposed, of course. The rocks, with their dagger-like edges on skin softened by the surf. When the fog of city humidity rolls back
(wading through delusion)

those with black eyes and blacker intents come out to play.

Your mother called you back to shore. She wanted you safe.

Do you miss her now?

Don't run. Let your shoes kiss the pavement. Carefully now; this is no ragtag love affair.

And whatever you do, my love; no matter how straitjacketed your heart, how icy your sweat, how scarce your breath:

Don't look back.

You draw in a deep breath, and

saw her crumpled against the doorway, an origami of hurt and confusion. The prehistoric wail that escaped her mouth cut the ears like broken glass.

A young woman stood stiffly nearby as the sobs rained blows on her. In one hand was a suitcase; the other, the throbbing pulse

(of the city)

of freedom.

“Why are you leaving?” the woman sobbed. She dug her fingers into her froth of mousy hair and wrenched with violence, bawling hysterically.

But the enticing scent of liberation has rendered her daughter sturdy as an oak; she waited in silence, coolly observing her roots fester and sob before her.

“Please stay,” her mother choked out. She writhed under the surge of uncontrollable sobs, her pathetic form shivering like a leaf.

Images flashed through the young woman’s mind, each tasting worse than the last. Her mother’s face splitting like a watermelon into hysterical laughter at the smallest of things, until the stares made the woman’s face burn like wildfire. The odd moods that descended,

(like humidity)

when her world blackened and everyone was an enemy. The moments when she lashed out in deluded

(sweet humidity of delusion)

anger and smashed plates in fits of fury.

In a sickening reel of credits, the words scrolled in her mind’s eye. Strange. Hysterical. Moronic. Weak.

“Will you visit me?” Her voice was sunken with tears.

The door drew the young woman like a magnet. Her mother let out another awful sob, tattooing the air with misery, and raised her palms in final, desperate supplication.

“Remember me!”

Her daughter looked away, and

realises with a sickening jolt that she misses her.

My dear, keep on your measured pace, your calculated tap dance of panicky high heels. I see your hands tremble, your lungs struggle to push out air, but listen to this: the ambling pace is a façade of indifference, a poker face in the game for your life.

Don’t look back. Eye contact provokes predators.

Every night sound could be a footstep. Every breath of air could be a hand, reaching...

But you won’t look, you can’t look, one look and your nerve is lost, one look and

(Don’t look behind you! You’ll fall!)

you’re dead.

But there is something else - an ache, deep in your chest; a root canal ignored and inflamed.

Your shoulders bunch forward as you walk, as if trying to cradle your heart.

You’ve never missed her more than this night.

A path, a gate, a door - the borders of familiarity. At the cool touch of the doorknob, the rigor mortis of terror unclenches its iron grip from your body, and your knees begin to buckle.

It is only after the door closes behind you when a strangled sob escapes.

There’s something you should know.

Yes, you. Young woman with the hair. The mousy locks you are twisting into a strained bun at the nape of your neck. Seeking your mother’s hair clasp and rescuing it from the floor.

Do you remember?

Do you remember the soft nest of her arms; her words and her tears; her laughter and theatre?

The words scroll in your mind's eye. *Unique. Warm. Vibrant. Rare.*

There's something you should know.

This life is a lonely tide. The rocks are like knives. Your mother calls from the shore.

She wants you back. She wants you safe.

Do you remember?

"I remember," you whisper, and cradle the hair clasp close.