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JO VAN ARKEL

BARBERISMS: A LOVE STORY

A TWENTY-MINUTE STORY WRITTEN IN MOREHEAD, KENTUCKY
AT THE FUZZY DUCK ON APRIL 12, 2008; 10:18-10:38 AM.

IT BEGAN WITH his eyebrows. Sam noticed them one morning when he first woke up and found himself staring in the bathroom mirror. His mother had always warned him against cutting his own hair, especially in the AM. But he couldn't help himself. He'd never seen his eyebrows in quite this way before. They were large dark marks on his forehead. Furry slashes. Why were they there? he wondered. What purpose did they serve?

He opened his mouth, his lips forming an "O." This further alarmed him, made his whole face seem improbable and poorly designed.

They were different sizes, his eyebrows. How could he have missed this on his own face? One eyebrow (the right one) in particular seemed to command his attention – at the peak of the arch, just before it should turn back down toward the eye, it flattened out and sprouted alarmingly.

He dug around in the bathroom drawer and found only nail

clippers, so he went to the kitchen, another drawer – only a screwdriver and some pencils. Then finally in a desk drawer in the hallway, some long heavy shears. Long enough to kill someone, he thought. Might be awkward, but they'd have to do.

When he was done, he saw he'd gone too far. The offending eyebrow was now flat across, which made the other look excessively arched, like he was in a chronic state of skepticism. So he went for the second eyebrow too, running the cold long blade flat against his forehead.

That, of course, changed everything, the shape of his eyes, the line of his lips! And his hair – what was it doing there? He started in on one side, clipping. He couldn't stop himself. Above the ears. Snip! Snip! With these scissors he could cut an entire ear off. A Van Gogh, he thought. New style.

Soon there was hair on the counter, hair on the floor, all over his shirt. The scissors weighed heavily in his hand, grew longer so he could barely hold them. Perhaps it would have been better if he'd had smaller shears.

"The right tool for the job," his mother said. She was dead. She stood behind him now with a solemn expression. She didn't have to say anything else. He knew what she was thinking. His father, who was nowhere to be seen and had been for some time, who had, in fact, moved into an apartment across town with a girl close to Sam's age, would not have cared what Sam did with scissors. Sam was living in his own childhood house, but the stuff around him, the furniture, the drawers, the pictures on the walls and books, none of it was familiar, none of it his.

Things looked far worse than before. He needed help, got in his

car, drove down one street, then another until he found a shop named Barberisms, one he'd never seen before on a street he didn't know existed that seemed to appear like magic.

She was sitting on a stool, flipping through a magazine when he came through the door. The shop was one of those in an old house. He felt like he was walking into the living room of her life. She looked up at him without lifting her head, so she seemed to be studying him under her eyebrows which were perfect, symmetrical – pierced.

She pumped up the chair with a foot pedal and studied him like Delilah in the mirror. He saw it all clearly. Her pale skin, black hair cut in jagged lines, like she had torn each hunk of hair out of a book of black pages then pasted them randomly on her head. "Beautiful," he thought.

She didn't ask what he wanted. She opened a small black leather case and drew out a pair of small scissors perfect for her hand. Sharp and precise.

"How long have you been cutting?" he said, before she began.

"You are my first," she answered. He knew it now. This is why he was here, was meant to be here from the very beginning. He didn't care if she was lying or not.