



KATE MEYNELL

A BOOK FOR A PERFORMANCE

Under the trunk and exposed root tops of the kapok tree covered with giant thorns, I mixed up potions. A bowl of water with xinea petals, bougainvillia blossoms, tropical insects form the suicides of the porch lamp and strands of my long hair. I have no recollection of what I actually did with my witches brew. I had a side parting with two long plaits. Occasionally, if I wanted to be sophisticated, one side plait.

If my parents were having a cocktail party (my favourite cocktail at this time was a white lady) I would undo my hair and let it loose, I would also be required to wear a dress, although I hated dresses because I was a tom-boy. At one of these parties a middle-aged slightly drunk colonial gent became fixated by my hair. He said he would give me five pounds when I could sit on it. It was nearly long enough if I put my head right back. Five pounds was an awful lot of money. I was hopeful.

Sometime after this my mother fell in love and moved out. The rest of us packed up the house and returned to Europe by boat. It was a French boat, with fancy food, and hard loo paper in the third and fourth class accommodation, and there wasn't a port-hole in my cabin.

The boat stopped in Marseilles and from there we took a train to Paris. All this time there had been the problem of my hair. Who would brush it in the morning? Whoever did invariably pulled at it and caught the brush on snarls, because only my mother could do it without pain.

One morning I managed it myself, not plaiting it, but I put it in bunches. This was the morning my father and sister and Annie went to the Pyramids. I was considered too young and stayed on board.

When we arrived in Paris it was wet, but I was excited because I was going to be an English school-girl, one of the heroines of 'Bunty' or 'Jackie'. I remember skipping down the road in the rain.

My grandmother thought it would be a good idea to get my hair cut at a smart Parisian establishment and my grandfather offered me three pounds to have it cut, which didn't seem too bad since the man with the fiver was a long way away and might well have forgotten. Also bobbed hair fitted in with the image.

The plaits were cut off, whole. A few snips each. Not even undone. So quick. At this point my hair was shoulder length, by the time I left the seat (crying bitterly) it couldn't have been more than an inch and a half all over.

Worse was to come. When we got back to England there were a few occasions when adults referred to me as 'sonny'.

My femininity, my mother and my hair all got tangled up, so I never had it cut short again.



Emily came over to take the photos for this booklet. I felt as though I was being pretty narcissistic. Stomach in. Chin up . . . but of course I don't want to be glamorous . . . I sit bolt upright in a wooden chair and it reminds Emily of that painting by Freida Kahlo with her cropped hair all over the floor. Scissors in hand, I laugh, she framed it. Later, writing this, thinking about how to make the stages of production apparent. It's not like breaking a video with a clip of 'real time'. – *dialogue with myself – try to imagine how my imaginary 'you' might read it, it's like looking in a mirror in a mirror, not getting anywhere, just a bit smaller and very repetitive.* How could I construct an equivalent in writing?

and they had hair as the hair of women and their teeth were as the teeth of lions.

Can I do without my camouflage? I have waited to see if I could do without it. Catherine said she wouldn't come and watch me cut it. As if it were as simple as self mutilation.

Zoë was in love with a boy at a desk in the row in front. One day she took a stealthy snip at the back of his head. She kept the lock for many years.

Hasidic men, Sikh men, Rastafarian men (and Samson) never (willingly) cut. Orthodox Jewish women shave their hair, and so do nuns – or at least they used to. Catholic women cover theirs before the eyes of God and travelling women always wear a scarf after they are married.

Nancy once told me to dispose of all hair and nail clippings, in order to prevent power being held if they got into the wrong hands.

Marion was telling me why monks shave a bald patch. In pre-history some people believed the spirit left the body through the top of the head. To facilitate this a hole was made in the cranium after death. Monks have the remnant of this practice to refer to the spiritual quality they have in spite of not yet being in heaven.

It is dead but grows, a bodily paradox which holds secrets.

What a lot of fuss, my hair isn't even all that long. I recall a photograph album an uncle had, an old family one, not our family. Several women in it had their hair loose and combed out into waves left by plaiting. Some had hair so long it reached the ground. Hair in my family doesn't grow like that however long you wait, it breaks off several inches below the shoulders. Mine used to be a bit less split and broken, and I think a little longer. Two years ago I decided to dye it 'Raven' black for a change. Well it was a change. Then after a couple of months I got bored with it so I thought I'd try 'Bergen' blonde. Unfortunately I didn't read the packet carefully enough. I was left with bright yellow roots where my hair had grown out, but the 'Bergen' hadn't touched the 'Raven'. There followed a series of self-administered remedial treatments (bleaching it out). And you should see the split ends I've got now.

Turn away thine eyes from

me, for they overcome me:

thy hair is as a flock of goats

that appear from Gilead.



