

Hair.

At age 5 it was a badge of honour. There was so much of it that if you sat backwards it splayed over your shoulders and down, down, to the floor. If you weren't so small and cute, and it wasn't so blonde, you would've looked like Cousin It. It took center stage in every photo, the first thing anyone noticed. There you were, with your unusual name and long hair. In the summer it worked with your ever-present sunglasses to protect your sensitive eyes. It made you special, it made you unique, it made you notable. It made your daddy happy.

At age 11, it made you feel childish. Pigtales and baubles weren't novelties, they were kid's fancies. Long and straight was boring. Other girls ironed and curled their hair and had bangs and layers and they were all much cooler than you. The hairstylist nearly jumped with joy when you told her she could do whatever she liked, just not too short, not too short, not too short, maybe bangs. You went shopping to find better clothes to go with your new 'do'. At age 11, you still thought a shirt and layers could make you seem cool, not so awkward, not alone at lunchtime.

At age 13 you read Little Women and Jo was like you. She wrote stories and was angry and loved ferociously. She cut off all her hair, sacrificed her "one beauty". It was love and sacrifice and it was powerful, and you cried with her in the dark that night. It taught you a different kind of bravery, and made you want to be Good.

At age 14 you followed a character's example. 9 inches for a thousand reasons. You donated it to a good cause, and then there was a girl out there with short blonde hair exactly like yours and you hope it makes her feel beautiful and strong. Your daddy looks sad, but he tells you he's proud of you, and that you look like Tinkerbell. You know that boys don't like girls with short hair, but you claim that's why you do it. Quietly, you also think of the older girls you've seen with short hair, and you think of how confident and fun they seem and you really want that, want out of the awkward stage, want to be pretty and quirky and confident. It makes you look more awkward, with your glasses and braces and bad posture, but you don't notice at the time and it gives you a taste of the confidence you wanted.

At age 16 you're growing it back out and when you curl it and wear eyeliner, people say it makes you look like Taylor Swift. Maybe they're right, because your boyfriend loves Taylor Swift too. You dyed some of it purple but it's almost gone now and it doesn't feel like you. You're angry and radical and long blonde hair doesn't fit the profile. You want to look dangerous but the long blonde hair isn't helping. You want to cut it all off again, telling yourself that this time it will look better, this time it won't make you awkward. You fantasize about rainbows on your head like a giant flag that says I'm Not Like You. But your boyfriend loves Taylor Swift and when you curl it and wear eyeliner, people say it makes you look like her.

At age 18 it's a badge of honour again. It's long, almost as long as it was when you were five but now your butt is a lot farther away so it's taking a while. It's a pain in the ass but it makes you feel special and beautiful. It's feminine, and now you're happier, more balanced and less angry at the world. Feminine isn't a bad thing anymore. You dye it blonder, two long hours in a salon chair where ladies gossiping over extensions and foils feels foreign but your hairstylist is

wonderful and your boyfriend is paying. You think of all the colors that you could put over white blonde hair but your boyfriend likes blonde and he's paying. The blonde covers the dull grey brown and makes you feel summery and like you're a little more put together. It's almost back to how it was when you were five, and it makes your daddy happy. It makes you happy.

At age 21 it's a mark of freedom. It's long still, as long as it's ever been, but now it's a deep, cerulean blue. It makes you stand out, makes strangers stare at you in the street, and you wear it with pride. You chose it yourself, and you paid for it yourself. Your mom is just glad you didn't shave it all off.

By age 23 it's been almost every color of the rainbow. It's been cut and grown out, bleached and home-dyed and color corrected for more money than you ever thought a haircut could cost, only to be dyed again a dozen more times when looking 'professional' suddenly doesn't matter. It's expression, and freedom, and a statement, but it's also comfort and acceptance. It's pictures sent back and forth with friends who always reply with excited encouragement, long evenings spent talking while applying bright dyes, the smiles from strangers in public who you share a silent kinship with.

At age 24 it's short again, shorter than it's been since you were 14, and you feel the most like yourself that you ever have. It doesn't give you confidence, not really. It reflects the confidence you already have, an unalienable sense of self-worth and strength. You think of the awkward teenager who wanted to be where you are now so desperately. You mourn for everything she had to experience to get there. You are so proud of her for making it, for getting to be someone she would be proud of. Your hair is short and shaggy and it feels like you, even on bad hair days. Your daddy ruffles it and when he looks at you, there is only pride in his eyes.