

## A New Cut

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Just after dark, I left my grandmother's cabin and went to the nearby playground sporting my new bowl haircut accessorized with red rubber boots, a blue Izod sweater, and jeans with holes in the knees. Before I left, I looked into the mirror and smiled: fun hair, cool outfit, straight hips. Pleased, I ventured out, the sky swelling and gathering above me, thick, taut air holding it all in. There was a group playing keep-away around the slide, girls against boys. I joined in, climbing up the slide after an orange-haired boy, his bright locks bouncing. Arriving at the top, he turned and looked at me. He thrust down his palm and held it there above my head. I stared up at him, his small eyes indistinguishable among a mass of fiery freckles. Confused, I reached up and slapped his hand. With a "whoop," he went over the top and swiftly disappeared. I climbed into position to go down after him when a girl down below pointed squarely at me, shouting: "There he is, up there! Get him!"

He? Him? I looked around, redly smiling, preparing to laugh when her mistake was discovered and pointed out by one of the other kids. I shivered. A voice behind me shouted: "Go down, man, run!" I swooped down, leapt to my feet at the bottom, and ran, settling in to the queer power of how it must always feel to be a boy. It was intoxicating, yet frightening to deceive these girls into believing that I belonged on the opposite team. At any moment they would notice my soft, long eyelashes, a girlish curve to my cheek. I would move in some un-boyish way and give myself away. But when I high-fived the boys and took off away from the girls, they believed I was a boy.

I ran fast, away from a dark-haired girl, looking back every few steps to see her wide-open laughter and ember-lit face pursuing me. I tripped on a protruding root and fell, my knee slashed open on a

piece of slate rock, my face dug into rocky soil. I lay there, splayed out on the ground with a bleeding knee and a scraped cheek. It began to rain. The girls screamed, everyone scattered. I turned over and found the dark haired girl crouched next to me. Our faces, so close, seemed to freeze, eyes locked, her black pupils shiny, beckoning. A car honked in the street. A truck rumbled by. The gritty taste of dirt lingered in my mouth, the smell of extinguished campfires hung, trapped under the rain. She placed one small hand on my shoulder, tilted her head, brushed a fingertip across my scraped cheek. "Does it hurt?" she asked. I attempted to speak, but couldn't get my mouth to move. The rain fell harder; a voice called from a distance. She leaned forward, summer-scented, and left the soft tremble of a kiss on my wounded cheek. She ran off. I sat there, drenched, a smile so big it ached.