

LYDIA

When she was eighteen,

Lydia's

hair had

started

First it got t h i n n e r , then it started to

to fall out.

r e
c e d e ,

like a man's hair.

This was a family trait, women in the whānau shared Lydia's problem. As they got older and their hair greyed, they would comb it ^{over} to one side, or forward to the forehead from the back of the head.

Lydia's favourite aunty Leigh was almost **seventy**, she was **meticulous** with her appearance and unlike her fat relations, had maintained the same body weight for thirty years.

She too was cursed with thinning hair

but maintained her commitment to her look, by going to the hairdresser every week.

The hair sat on the top of her head like a bread-roll, piled upwards from the sides, coloured to a luminous lavender.

“I will go to the hairdresser every week until the day I die,” she would often say.

“Until the day I DIE.”

Aunty Leigh always said the last “**die**” emphatically, loudly.

Lydia thought this was her way of letting everyone know that she wouldn't be around for too much longer; so the whānau had better give her the attention she **craved** and **deserved**.

It bothered Lydia that her hair was **thinning**; she went online and saw that she wasn't alone. Lots of young celebrities seemed to be **battling** the same problem, and there were many ways to disguise the unsightly problem.

Lydia became **obsessed** with her issue and tried different techniques to give the **impression** of a full head of hair. How she parted her hair, how long she kept it, all of these different elements were **important**.

She took selfies of herself from different angles. The area that bothered her most was the back of her head, the place she couldn't see, Lydia worried about what people walking behind her would notice.

In **reality**, Lydia was a pretty girl who needn't have worried. She took a cue from her aunt Leigh and became **fastidious** about her appearance.

People were **attracted** to her because of her **beauty**, whenever she entered a room, **strangers** would **gravitate** to her.

“What beautiful eyes you have,” they would say.

“Gosh your skin is beautiful,” older women would say to her.

Lydia would smile back **politely, worrying** that they would notice the **imperfection** on the top of her head.

When she was twenty-five Lydia met **Mikaere**
– at the birthday party of a friend.
It was held at a caf -bar called **Tastebuds**
in the main street of Whanganui.
It was owned by a gay couple,
Jeremy and Jason,
who'd moved up to the city from Wellington,
for a kind of pre-retirement phase of life.
Locals were **delighted**
with the addition of a new restaurant.
A lot of the cakes were raw
and Jeremy and Jason
specialised in paleo fare.

Lydia's favourite breakfast in the city
was eggs benedict, made with coconut cream,
at Tastebuds.

One night at Tastebuds,
Lydia was wearing a **beret** and a **black jumpsuit**.
Even though she was **shy** about her hair,
Lydia drew attention to herself with what she wore.
Also she was a tall woman,
difficult to miss in a room full of partygoers.
She was **immediately attracted** to Mikaere,
who was also tall.
He sported a well-cared-for beard
and **a large taniwha tattoo** on one shoulder.
Mikaere was two years older than Lydia
and had just graduated from Art School in Auckland.
He moved to Whanganui to tutor art at the local polytechnic.
There was quite a creative hub in Whanganui,
with lots of artists in studios in old buildings,

some as far out as
Castlecliffe by the sea.

“You’ll like it here,”

Lydia said to Mikaere.

“I know a few artists and writers you should meet.”

“I think I should meet you again too,”

Mikaere said with a glint in his eye.

Lydia’s heart-beat quickened

but she also felt **cautious**.

Would Mikaere still find her **attractive**

if he knew about the imperfection **hiding**

underneath her beret, she wondered.

She’d dated a few boys over the years

and the most difficult thing to deal with

was explaining her thinning hair.

She felt compelled to tell them about it,

in the same way you would tell a lover

you’d been in jail,

or had secret children.

It was a big deal for Lydia,

her hair.

She saw Mikaere for a couple of months before they had sex.

Mikaere told Lydia she was being **ridiculous** when she showed him the top of her head, where the thinning was most noticeable.

It’s all in your head, Mikaere said laughing at his own unintentional joke.

Then he proceeded to tell Lydia

about all of the parts of her that he thought were **beautiful**.

His favourite feature were Lydia’s eyes he said, and being the window to the soul,

he could see deep inside her.

He felt peaceful when he looked into Lydia’s eyes.

He wanted to swim inside her eyes and become part of her, **forever**.

Mikaere had a tattoo
in the small of his back,
a **tuatara**
that looked like
it was **crawling** up his spine.

Lydia liked to trace
the outline of the tattoo
with her **wet finger**,
and she would follow
the line from
the end of
the **tuatara's tail**,
to the hard point
of Mikaere's
tail bone.

Mikaere wanted Lydia to take her finger **further**, to insert it between his arse cheeks. He **moaned loudly** whenever Lydia did this to him. Mikaere had had sex with men a few times, he said, that was how he'd discovered the pleasure of his arse. Lydia wasn't bothered that Mikaere was **bisexual**, in a way it made him **more attractive**. I'm going out with a bisexual artist she mused to herself, **fancy that**.

After six months Lydia and Mikaere moved in together. They found an old shopfront which must have been a corner shop in its day, at the end of a tree-lined street. It was not far from the centre of Whanganui, and across the road from the river. Behind the shop was a two-bedroomed unit, and beyond that a small square garden area. Because the shop had been empty for years, there were no plants in the garden, which was nothing more than a few square metres of flat hard soil, covered in patchy grass and weeds. **This will be my space**, Lydia thought when she saw it, **I want to turn this into a sanctuary**.

Over the next few months, the building became visually much more interesting, and quite the talk of the neighbourhood. Mikaere painted a large mural down one side of the building, and you could see him working on his art through the window as you walked past. The Whanganui Chronicle wrote a special feature about him, like they had

for many of the other local artists. Lydia loved seeing Mikaere on page 3 even though he said it was no big deal. They went to gallery openings and exhibitions together, Lydia thought to herself that they made a nice looking couple.

Lydia filled the garden with succulents, and sunflowers and sweet peas. She liked saying the names of the flowers together, they slipped off her tongue, Lydia got great joy out of the garden. She nurtured her plants in the same way she nurtured her relationship; fastidiously. Lydia worried secretly that Mikaere would lose interest in her, especially as her hair got thinner. She noticed how it covered the bathroom floor after she had a shower. It accumulated in the **corners**, like a constant reminder of her **imperfections**. She used a small dustpan and broom to sweep the hair up. Lydia went to the doctor who gave her a foaming solution, which she applied everyday, **but still** the hair fell out.

“I’m worried about my hair baby,”

she said to Mikaere one night over dinner.

“What if I go bald?”

“I’ll still love you,”

Mikaere said.

Lydia remained **vigilant**, checking how Mikaere was with her, whether his affections changed in any way. Over the next few months, as her hair kept thinning, this became a major preoccupation, Mikaere’s love for her.

The more she worried, the thinner her hair became.

One day, she visited Aunty Leigh,
who lived in a small cottage overlooking Whanganui,
on a hill on the south side of the river.

The cottage was white stucco on the outside,
with large windows across the front of it.

Inside the house was full of light
because of the expansiveness of the windows.

What used to be a porch was now closed in with an aluminium conservatory
and Aunty Leigh had put a table and chairs there,
so she can drink tea every morning and enjoy the view.

“I love Whanganui,” Aunty Leigh said to Lydia as she sipped tea from a delicate cup, painted with roses and highlighted with gold leaf.

“When Stan bought this house I couldn’t understand why, it was so dishevelled. And after he added the windows across the front and built the conservatory, then I understood the charm of it.”

Lydia stared down at the carpet,
which was like Aunty Leigh’s tea cup,
except it was turquoise.
Large flowers covered the floor
in an Axminster pattern you didn’t see much these days.

“I like it too but sometimes I feel trapped here.
Sometimes I’m desperate to be anonymous
which is impossible in Whanganui.”

“And therein lies its charm, it is a small city,”

Aunty Leigh said.

“This world you and Mikaere live in,
your artistic universe, you would be
pushed to find that anywhere else.
Artists are drawn here because of the
community of creative people.”

Lydia has always thought that Aunty Leigh talks like the English aristocracy.
She uses words like therein and moreover,
vocabulary Lydia can’t imagine anyone else in the whānau saying.

“Why do you think you are so refined?” Lydia asked her.

“Studying English at University changed me,” Aunty Leigh said.

“It opened up a fantasy world and I realised that my
childhood had been very cloistered. Until then I had really
only ever socialised with whānau and I wanted more,
which is why I married Stan.”

“With Mikaere I feel like I have both, the Māori world and the outside as well.
And it’s integrated, everyday I’m in both, you know?”

“You look good together and you look relaxed with one another.
You can see that in couples, if they are at peace.”

“I feel peaceful most of the time but underneath I am anxious,
worried that he will leave me.”

“That’s an awful thing to live with,” said Aunty Leigh.
“It’s like being haunted.”

“Sometimes I feel like a ghost,” Lydia said.

“I feel like I am not here.”

Lydia played with the ends of her hair, which hung around her shoulders like seaweed.
“My hair, I hate my hair.”

“Oh darling, does it make you unhappy?
It’s a whānau curse, women with thin hair.
We have to accept it or we will go crazy.”

“I worry about it all the time, this imperfection, I hate it.”

“But you can have fun with it too,”
Aunty Leigh said.

“This purple rinse, it’s my way of saying I don’t
care about it. When I was young I worried about
it but as I got older I realised that it was incon-
sequential. Stan, he didn’t care, and that was the
main thing, that my man would still love me.”

“Mikaere says the same thing, but for me it’s about how I feel.
And the hair, it’s like this thing I can’t resolve.”

“Well then you have to trust yourself to find
a way through this issue, and do it your way.
Whatever you do, be you.”

The next day, when Lydia climbed out of the shower, she noticed more hair
had
f
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e
n
onto
the
floor.

She used toilet paper to wipe the hair up from the linoleum,
tossed it into the toilet, and flushed it away.

Lydia felt something **crawling** underneath her skin
and **scratched** at her forearms **roughly**.
She tried to break her skin with her fingernails.
She revisited a memory from childhood.

She is seven, in the kitchen of her parents' home, drying the dishes which are stacked high in one of those white dish-racks from the period. Lydia is drying coffee cups which she then hangs onto a wooden mug tree sitting on the bench, underneath the cupboard where the plates and bowls are stored. She reaches to the top of the dishes stacked in the rack for another mug and as she does, her foot slips on the wet linoleum, made even more slippery by the dishwashing liquid which has dripped off the dishes as Lydia dries them. Lydia falls face first onto the floor, so too half of the crockery still stacked on the rack.

Lydia can hear her mother's footsteps thumping down the hallway towards the kitchen. She stands at the door, her hands on her hips and looks at Lydia.

"Darling," she says, "everything will be alright."

"I don't know why I am like this,"
Lydia says as she comes back into the moment with Aunty Leigh.

"Why am I like this?"

The next day she and Mikaere went for a walk at Virginia Lake. They passed by lots of people in small groups, walking and running; larger family groups sat on the grass banks watching their children play. Mikaere put his arm around Lydia's shoulder.

“I’ve been thinking,” Mikaere said. “These problems you’ve been having,
the way you obsess over your hair, the way you hurt yourself ...

“What makes you think I hurt myself?”

“I’m not stupid babe, I see things, marks on your body.
Sometimes I think I can hear you, the craziness in your head.
I don’t think it’s normal to have that kind of shit up there.”

They kept walking in silence, Mikaere's arm pulled Lydia closer to him.

“I can’t help you with this stuff. I can love you but I can’t make you better.
Maybe you should see someone. I can come with you, maybe we can get
some counselling together to help me understand what to do, how I can
support you.”

“My doctor, sometimes I tell him what I’m like,” Lydia said.
“He thinks I should go on antidepressants.”

“Maybe you should, if it’s going to help,
nothing wrong with that,” Mikaere said.

“I’ve got this thing about taking drugs, a mental block about it.
It’s like admitting that I’m not well.”

“Nothing wrong with that either, admitting you’re sick.
It doesn’t make you a bad person or a freak.
Some people have cancer, you just have a different illness.”

“OK then, first step is to talk to the doctor.”

“Yeah and maybe I come.”

“Oh good, a team effort, it makes it not such a big deal.”

They stopped at the top of a small bridge,
and looked into the lake.

Lydia's reflection looked back at her, her hair **long**, her forehead **smooth** and **large**.

“Sometimes when I look in the mirror,
I like what I see, other times not so much.”

Lydia made a time with the doctor the next day.

She and Mikaere sat together in the waiting room of the surgery,
which was in a large old villa down by the river.

“This my partner Mikaere,” Lydia said to Doctor Bracewell,
a grey haired Pākehā, with a large nose.

“I told him you think I should go on antidepressants.”

“Yes I really do think it's the best thing.
I think you've been clinically depressed a number of
times over the years that you've been coming here.”

“Tell him about harming yourself,” Mikaere said.

“I scratch my arms till they bleed sometimes.
Certain things set me off, like my hair. I hate my thin hair.”

“You've got lovely hair,” Dr Bracewell said.

“People don't see what you see.
When they see you they see a gorgeous woman.
Do people tell you that you are attractive? I bet they do.”

“Sometimes.”

“A lot,” Mikaere chipped in.

“You need to listen to the compliments,” Dr Bracewell said.

Dr Bracewell gave Lydia a prescription for two different types of medication. One would even out Lydia's moods, and the other would help with anxiety. He warned Lydia that they would make her feel drowsy for a couple of weeks, but she would also sleep better. He also referred Lydia to psychiatrist at the local hospital and said she should practice mindfulness meditation.

“It’s not one thing that’s going to make you feel better,” said Dr Bracewell.
“It’s lots of things working together.”

He made an appointment for the following week to check how Lydia was dealing with the medication.

The drugs made Lydia feel stoned for the first few days. She started running in the mornings because Dr Bracewell said it would lift her moods. Her limbs felt weighed down, difficult to move, but Lydia was determined to push through the foggy cloud of mild depression. When she got home she would collapse onto her bed, panting and sweaty. After a few minutes she would feel her spirit lift, her mind would clear.

“I always feel better after the run,” she said to Mikaere at breakfast.
“I’ve been reading about it online. Exercise releases endorphins, which in turn improves your mood.”

“It’s great that you enjoy it,” said Mikaere.

“The mindfulness group Dr Bracewell sent me to is good too. They talk about staying in the present, not worrying about the future.”

“Do you feel less anxious?”

“It comes and goes but overall I think it’s getting better.”

Lydia thought about what Dr Bracewell told her about there not being **one cure**. She started to write a diary of her feelings every morning after the run.

Sometimes when she read the day’s entry she thought she really was **crazy**. Her thoughts were **manic** and **disconnected**.

Other mornings, there was more coherence to her daily writing.

“It’s like therapy,” she told Mikaere.
“My journal, it saves me.”

A few months later Lydia was out running
at Castlecliffe and she stopped
to catch her breath
outside a small strip of empty shops.

She admired
her reflection
in the window.
Her limbs were taut;
the skin on her face
shiny like an onion.

It occurred to Lydia
that her journal was like
a story-book,
and that ever since she was a child
she'd wondered what it would be like
to write a novel.

A gust of **wind**

blew the cap off Lydia's head.

The cap, which had the Rolling Stones mouth
logo
embroidered into the front of it,
was a gift from Aunty Leigh.

Lydia ran after it laughing hysterically.

"Come back!"
she cried.