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**Editor-in-Chief**

**Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor**

**Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## The Day Anu had a Haircut

**Nandita Dutta**  
Mumbai (India)

Yet another morning when I jostle my way into the second class ladies compartment of the Churchgate local. Amid swear words, jutting elbows and the stench of fresh sweat mixed with talcum powder.

I settle down and an elderly woman tugs at my shoulder to make room for her. I squeeze myself in between two women and plug my earphones to divert attention. It will take twenty minutes to my destination, till then I can relax. The train halts at the next station and a foreigner gets in. Women turn their heads to look at her repeatedly. She is dressed in a floral mini-skirt and a grey spaghetti top. She comes and sits across from me. Pointed nose adorned with a sparkling stud. She seems quite cheerful. My eyes wander to the bare white skin between the borders of her top and the skirt. A piercing on the navel. She looks sexy, I think. She smiles at me. Her blonde hair is cut very short in a fringe.

It's lunchtime in office. I attach the presentation in a mail and hit the send button. Then I take out my lunch box and walk towards the canteen. Avinash is munching on his daily fare, egg sandwiches. Christina has ordered chicken *biryani* from the office canteen. Palash and I open our lunch boxes and the aroma of spices pervades the air.

"Come on Anu, don't be a spoilsport. Everyone is going from our team but you," Avinash grumbles again.

"I told you the reason Avi. I don't feel like staying away from my family on Sundays. It's the only day I can spend with them and they have some expectations too," I tell him one final time.

"She is right Avinash, don't force her," Christina supports me between gulping her *biryani* and sipping ice tea.

"She is right? Rubbish! It's a matter of one Sunday only. Rest of the Sundays of the year she can spend with her family. She is going to miss out on a lot of fun," Avinash bangs his fist on the table.

"OK, OK *baba*...I will try," I say weakly, trying to end the conversation.

As I step out of office, Avinash's words keep ringing in my ears. The office picnic this Sunday; trekking, canoeing and food by a river. It's going to be a lot of fun. I decide to give it a second thought. No way. It will be expecting too much of my family to let go of me on a Sunday. I push the thought out of my mind. On the way to the bus-stop, I notice a big standee outside a salon: **50% off on haircuts today. Any length.**

I stop. Short hair in a fringe. Somehow that image is stuck in my mind. I haven't had a haircut in ages, and I could get a stylish one for cheap today. I tell myself that it could be a nice consolation

for missing out on the office picnic. Without wasting another moment I step into the salon and request for a haircut. I have to wait for fifteen minutes, they tell me. A teenage girl checks her hair thoroughly in the mirror and then vacates her seat. I jump into it spiritedly and demand for my hair to be cut short, a little above my shoulders, in a fringe.

I inspect my face proudly and walk out of the salon with renewed confidence. I don't remember when was the last time I felt so nice about myself. "You look so pretty in this hairstyle, like a little girl" a woman I have encountered before in the local train compliments.

My mother-in-law almost freezes with shock on seeing me. I smile embarrassedly at her but her eyes seem to exude balls of fire. I wait for her to say something but she sits on the sofa stupefied. With a throbbing heart, I go to my room to wash up and change. "You won't believe what she has done to her beautiful long tresses! I have invited the Sharma's for dinner on Sunday. They wanted to see my beautiful *bahu*. Now what will they see? My *parkati bahu!*" I overhear her talking on the phone with her eldest daughter.

Tears well up in my eyes without intimation. All the joy of having the haircut drains out of my body drop by drop. I feel wounded by her words. I sit alone in my room and try to comfort myself. For a moment it occurs to me to beg her forgiveness. But I shove the thought out as soon as it came. Why should I be sorry for what I do with my hair? I am no showpiece to be flaunted before her friends.

I avoid facing her and head straight to the kitchen. She has already made chicken curry and rice. I take out the rolling pin and the board from the cabinet and start making chapattis for dinner. My husband calls to say he won't be home before midnight. My heart suffers another setback. His presence could have lightened the atmosphere at home. As I begin to set the table for dinner, my mother-in-law turns the television off, stomps into her room and closes the door behind her with a bang. Thus she makes an obvious display of her rage.

I am determined to not let anyone ruin my joy. I sit down at the table and serve myself a generous helping of chicken curry and rice. I scoop out some mango pickle from the jar and relish my meal. My husband's youngest sister emerges from the door unexpectedly. Her mouth expands into a gaping hole.

"*Bhabhi*, you look fab! When did you get this done?"

"Today, on my way back from office. Does it look good?" I ask hesitantly.

"It looks hot! Damn hot," she says and pulls out a chair. I serve chicken curry for her in a bowl.

I suddenly feel better. Perhaps it's just the older generation that makes a fuss over such things. I have an urge to confide in her, my young, college going sister-in-law.

"Tina, to tell you the truth, mom seems quite upset about it. She hasn't spoken a word since I entered home. If I knew it would upset her so much, I wouldn't have done it," I whimper. The last sentence flows out of me unknowingly, perhaps because it is her daughter I am talking to.

“*Bhabhi*, just chill. Mom is like that. She is particularly attached with long hair because she had really long tresses when she was young. When she conceived *Mona di*, her hair started thinning and they never surfaced back. So she is a bit touchy about it,” Tina explains.

I feel a tinge of remorse and affection towards my mother-in-law. But her words seem too harsh to be forgotten.

“But I must say, this hairstyle is a tad too youthful. It would suit a college girl. Why did you need to cut your hair so short for office?” Tina adds, as she clears our plates and heads to the kitchen.

The clink of plates dropping over one another in the kitchen sink sound to me as if I am being stabbed in my chest over and over again. Suppressing tears, I wash my hands and rush to my room. Hurt and exhausted, I fall asleep before I know.

I wake up when Rohit turns on the lights. He smiles at me wearily and begins to change into his night clothes. Then he slips into the quilt, says good night and gradually withdraws into a deep slumber. I playfully stroke his hair and whisper something into his ear but he doesn't respond. I go back to sleep.

I am wearing a violet frock with yellow flowers and my silky hair hang loosely over my shoulders. My father bribes me with a bar of chocolate to go to the barber shop. I sit on a high chair and the barber drapes a black cloth round my neck. Then he takes out a razor and a pair of scissors from a drawer. With the gargantuan scissors, he chops off my hair swiftly while humming an old Hindi song. Locks of black and silky hair mound up on the floor. The scissors work feverishly through my hair and the black mound rises. I look at my dull image in the stained mirror. I am bald. I let out a shriek and the sharp scissors accidentally pierce through my scalp. Blood oozes out of my head. The face of the barber morphs into the face of my mother-in-law.

I wake up and look at myself in the mirror. My frizzy hair looks nothing short of lovely. I make two cups of tea. There is one used cup lying in the sink, so my mother-in-law has had tea already. As I carry a tray to the living room, Rohit looks up from the papers, “Wow! Someone's had a haircut!”

So he finally noticed. “And, what do you think of it?”

“Well...you look pretty as ever,” he says and buries his head into the papers again.

I cannot control myself. “Well...your mother thinks I look like *parkati*, whatever that means, and your sister insinuated I must be having an affair in the office to get a fancy haircut as this,” I blurt out.

“Fair enough. If you suddenly have the urge to look like an exotic teenager, they have a reason to comment.”

I choke on tea. “But you just said I look pretty, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I said so. You do look pretty. But had you asked me before, I would have said I prefer long hair on you. You had really beautiful hair baby,” he says without looking up from the papers.

I want to tell him that a haircut doesn’t mean the permanent loss of my so-called beautiful hair that everyone seems to be mourning. But one look at the watch and I know I should be getting ready for office. An unfinished conversation and a half empty cup of tea linger on the table.

I want to go back in time and undo the haircut. I want to forget all the agony that it has caused me in the last few hours. But it seems to have become an inseparable part of me now. I get jitters from anticipating the reaction of my colleagues. I want to be invisible for a day.

“Sexy!” Avinash winks at me as I enter the office.

“Look at you Anu, you look so gorgeous,” Melissa looks over from her desk.

Christina and Palash hang around my desk, quizzing me over my new hairstyle. Christina is determined to visit the same salon in the evening.

“But the 50% off was valid until yesterday. Generally they charge a fortune for haircuts,” I derive pleasure in teasing her.

“Bitch!” she mutters under her breath.

It’s lunch time. Christina and Palash have gone out for a business presentation. Avinash proposes we go out for lunch. I didn’t feel like cooking in the morning today, so I just fried the leftover rice from last night for my lunchbox. It is not tremendously exciting. So I join Avinash and we go to a nearby Mediterranean restaurant where we order two chicken *shawarmas*.

“You want something to drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“Come on, eat and drink as much as you like. The lunch is on me.”

“What for?”

“Isn’t it a reason enough that the hottest lady in the office has agreed to lunch with me?”

I blush.

“That’s enough Avi. Stop flattering me. You can get me a Nescafé if you insist.”

“If I insist? OK. I also insist that you join us for the picnic tomorrow.”

Oh God, here he launches the tirade again. I must have known before. I can instantly feel my temples throbbing.

“OK tell me, what difference does one Sunday make in your family-life? How are you going to spend the day otherwise?” he goes on, without waiting for my answer.

As soon as he pops the question, I can visualize it in my head: a Sunday spent with my family. My mother-in-law casting at me those scorned looks. An indifferent husband sleeping well into the afternoon and then waking up groggy-eyed to watch television. A humiliating scene if the Sharma’s really come over for dinner.

“But isn’t it too late now? Will the HR department still be willing to accommodate me? Can you make that sure?” A flurry of words rush out of me in a fraction of time. A rapturous Avinash almost bends over to kiss me.

When Christina is back in office, she leans over my desk and whispers, “Tell me honestly, are you having an affair with Avinash or something? I heard you two went out for lunch and he managed to convince you for tomorrow. What was this magic spell that he cast on you?”

Happiness is a bubble and there will always be people wanting to prick it with safety pins. But I have decided to ignore them.

“Sex. We had some out-of-the-world sex on the lunch table” I wink at Christina and begin drafting a new mail on my computer.