**The Miller’s Daughter**

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It’s the day before winter break and I’m in my daughter’s first grade class, helping with the holiday party. It’s a cereal themed party and each kid has brought a box to share. As I pour milk over bowls of Fruit Loops and Lucky Charms, I notice the girl who sits next to my daughter. She is the only one who has brought bran flakes, in a bag. I notice that her hair is blonde like my daughter’s, but it’s unkempt, wispy, and short—not short like she just had a haircut, but short like it hasn’t grown well. It looks like toddler hair. I wonder about it as I look around the room and see 21 other heads of hair, many with bow-topped ponytails and intricate braids twining around each other like vines.

I wonder if she’s malnourished and that’s why her hair hasn’t grown well. Maybe her parents smoke. Maybe her mom is depressed. I wonder if the girl wishes her hair looked different. I wonder if she’s noticed.

I feel an impulse, which immediately I know I will not act on, to touch her hair. I want to spritz it with detangling spray and brush it gently, starting at the bottom to get the tangles out and working my way up until the brush runs through without snagging. I want to ask her what would she like, French braids or pigtails? And even if she chooses pigtails, I’ll braid the ends because it’s pretty and will make for fewer tangles tomorrow. I want to add a pair of matching bows made of shiny pink ribbon to the top of each pigtail, then stand behind her as she looks in the mirror and smiles.

I want to fix this problem.

Two months later, my daughter hunches over the kitchen counter for nearly two hours, using post-it notes, white cardstock, sparkle pens, and crayons to make one-of-a-kind valentines for all of her classmates. Later that night after she has gone to bed, I sit alone at the counter and read the valentines one by one, charmed by the first-grade spelling in her strikingly deliberate notes:

*You are awase trieing geting bettr eche day but thats not all you are grate!*

*Good job for being the studint of the week.*

*You’r grate at math you can cawnt from 1 to 100.*

*Good job for lusing that tuth you have bin brave so meny times.*

The next valentine I pull from the pile is a rectangular piece of cardstock with a crayon drawing of a girl in a gray dress with red lips, brown eyes, and bright yellow hair. The note says:

*You have a grate smile. You’r hare is like gold. You’r so frendly plese be here forevr.*

When I flip the valentine over and see who it’s for, my hand involuntarily comes to my mouth, and I suddenly feel light-headed.

It’s the girl with the hair. The thin, unbraided hair.

The kitchen is quiet, and I sit for a long time, breathing slowly and resting my chin on my hand in a thinking pose. I look down at the valentine pinched between my fingers and stare at the waxy words, reading them again and again.

At some point, I realize that it wasn’t a spindle the miller’s daughter used to spin straw into gold. It was her eyes. Her clear, unfettered eyes.

The next day my daughter comes home from school and announces that it has, once again, been the best day of her life. She is holding a paper-heart-adorned lunch sack full of valentines from her classmates. I ask her to show them to me, and she sits at the kitchen table and pulls them out one by one. There’s one with a T. Rex that looks like he’s roaring at you when you tilt it from side to side, a baby Yoda with the message, *You’re out of this world*, and a bumble bee keychain with the message, *Bee Mine*. She carefully separates goodies from notes, making two piles on the table. Her smile has gaps, and her hair is frazzled from a day of being six.

Please be here forever. Be like this forever.