

# Layering

by Roxana Robinson

We are in the back yard, on the lawn. It is August, and very hot. It is hard to move, and hard to think of a reason to. Yesterday my stepson, who is twelve years younger than me, came in to the room where I was sketching. He is staying alone with us for the month of August, a first. He did not look at what I was doing, he never does. He seems to feel that the things I do are terribly private. He kept his eyes away from my paper—I was doing a sketch of a weed I had pulled up from the garden, roots, dirt, and all—and asked me where he could get a haircut. Jonathan, his father, gets his cut in the city now, so I don't know any good places nearby. There is a terrible little dive in the village, I told him, with a fly-specked barber pole on the front porch, and girlie calendars on the wall. I walk past it on the opposite side of the street, it gives me the creeps.

Frank asked me if I would cut his hair. I cut his hair when he was nine years old, a small boy. He hated the sight of himself afterward, and his mother called up Jonathan and told him I was presumptuous. That was eight years ago, and Frank is now taller than I am, with a devotion to sun rays and his track team. He has wide shoulders and narrow hips and long legs and he is very, very tanned. He goes running in the evenings, and when he returns my dog starts out across the lawn, thinking those rapid, steady footsteps might belong to a cat burglar, or a second-story man. Halfway across the lawn she begins to wag her tail and then sits down and yawns, pretending that she knew all along that the footsteps belonged to Frank, who loves her.

I told Frank I would cut his hair, but later. I could not have sounded eager, because when we went into the village in the afternoon he walked over to the dive to make an appointment with the calendar collector, but it was shut.

We're on our own for most of the week. Jonathan travels a lot. Frank goes to his tutoring in the mornings, and I sketch. After lunch we go up to play tennis on the red clay court in the woods. We have to keep propping up the posts that hold up the net, and the net itself is full of holes. The surface is soft, and there are pine needles all over it, which makes for exciting bounces. Frank's serve can tunnel right under my feet, when it goes in, but he's erratic, and I still beat him. Most of his shots go out, but he's faster and stronger than I am, and he gets to everything. I just send the ball back until he gets impatient, tries for a winner, and hits it into the net. It won't be too much longer that I can beat him.

After tennis today we walk back to the house through the pine woods. It is high midday, and most of the insects are quiet. There are a lot of crows walking around in the field, having a meeting. My dog spends most of her time disrupting their meetings, she is nearly a professional at this, but this time she is down by the house in the shade, her raspberry tongue hanging out.

We go down and lie on the back lawn, underneath the ash tree. Even the lawn gives off heat, even the grass is hot. My dog comes over and lies down next to me. I rub her nose and she loses control. She rolls over onto her back and opens her mouth like a crocodile, and shows the whites of her eyes.

"You are wacko, Beedle," Frank says, digging his knuckles into his eyes. Beedle flips herself over toward him and wags her tail, on her back. Her tongue falls out sideways on the grass.

"Where's Dad?" asks Frank.

"Houston," I say.

"When's he coming home?"

"Tomorrow or Thursday."

I close my eyes and begin to go to sleep. There are cicadas in the trees all around us. It is past midsummer, all right, we are heading into fall. One of the trees along the fence, a swamp maple, is showing yellowy-orange. I lie without moving, my head toward my shoulder, my legs crossed at the ankles.

“So, are you going to cut my hair?” Frank asks.

I am asleep, and reluctant. I open my eyes and close them again. “Sure,” I say. We listen to the cicadas. I start to go back to sleep.

“Now?” asks Frank.

“Sure,” I say.

Frank brings out an old wicker armchair and a comb, and I get out the scissors. I start cutting. I don’t know why I first thought I could cut hair—no one ever taught me—but I’ve been doing it ever since boarding school. I have always cut my own. By now, if I’m not particularly good at it, at least I know what I can do. Men’s haircuts are always trims. You just shorten everything. If it’s layers, you shorten each layer. If it’s a bowl cut, you get a smaller bowl. Frank’s hair is very thick, and has lots of layers. I start out at the top, using the comb to pull up a clump and let it fall. I think this looks very professional, though I don’t know why barbers do it. In any case Frank has no mirror and can’t see I’m doing it so I stop and begin snipping. My dog comes over and leans against my leg.

“Hi, Beedle,” I say. I stop and rub her.

Frank sits very straight. He is wearing only a pair of red basketball shorts, and he is perfectly tanned, all over his shoulders and his arms and his legs. His legs are crossed at the ankle, like a good child.

“You know how to do this, don’t you?” he asks.

“Hey,” I say, “what kind of question is that?” Snip, I go, snip. I wonder if I’m cutting it too short. “Just tell me how you want it, mon.”

Frank puts his hands back, pulling at his hair. “I want it pretty short over the ears,” he says, pulling at it.

I start out on the right side, above the ear. His ear is perfectly brown, like the rest of him. Frank had his ear pierced in the spring, and his girlfriend gave him a diamond stud. He is very good-looking, but he has a round, honest face, with raised eyebrows, and that diamond stud looks out of place, as though he were trying to pass for a cad.

I pull the hair away from his ear and begin to cut it. Snip, I go, snip. I keep brushing at his ear. It is very soft: ears are always soft. No one has tough ears. I try to keep my fingertips away from Frank’s ear, but they keep

brushing at it. I pull out big hanks of hair from the top and the side with the comb, and give good professional swipes to them, straight-edge cuts. Then I have to do the back of his neck. Frank bows his head, his back still very straight. There are bits of clipped hair on his shoulders, a lot of little brown hairs littering those straight, perfectly tanned shoulders. It is very hot, and the hair is sticking to his skin. It is so hot we are both sweating, very lightly, but everywhere. Anywhere our skin is touched at all it glistens and turns moist. So all those hairs stay on Frank's tanned shoulders.

Frank and I have always gotten along, it's his younger sister I fight with. Jonathan wouldn't have dreamed of leaving me alone with her. Once, though, I made Frank cry. He dropped all three plates of spaghetti he was carrying, after assuring me everything would be fine. I yelled at him, never imagining that he would cry: he had been so certain of things the moment before. I felt bad for weeks. He was nine years old, and was kind to me when I apologized.

One of the cats come and jump into Frank's lap. They don't ever stop to think if you want a cat in your lap, cats just jump in. Frank laughs and starts to stroke him. "Did you think I was lonely?" he asks the cat, "did you think I was missing a cat? It's too hot to have a cat in your lap, didn't you know that?"

The cat lifts his head and closes his eyes. He knows better than to listen. This is a messy blond cat who sheds, and hairs come off with every stroke. Now they float in the heavy air, and Frank's legs begin to have little blond wisps on them.

Sometimes I cut Jonathan's hair, too. Every time I touch his hair I stroke his head, so that it is a nice, long, doting session. I am allowed to touch his ears, and follow them around the curve and blow into them to clear them of the clipped hair. Jonathan lifts up one shoulder to ward me off: I'm supposed to be just cutting his hair.

"No degenerate behavior," he says, but he loves it.

I have not been looking forward to spending August with Frank: I thought he was going to be a belligerent teenager, playing the radio loudly all over the house and using the telephone all the time and complaining

about everything. Wrong. All he's been is nice, carrying things in from the car without being asked and helping with the animals and cutting the lawn and being tutored in the mornings and studying in the evenings (which is why he's with us for this month). He does everything without griping, with real grace, in fact, and I begin to feel very silly: all my preparations for war, all my ultimatums and decrees, how I would quell him if Jonathan were away and there was an uprising. Instead I got this calm, mild, good-natured kid. I'm ashamed of myself. I snapped at him in the beginning, just to open hostilities. *Don't* bounce that ball in the kitchen, I said, sounding like someone just before they grab the axe. Frank shook his head and took the ball outside. *Don't* get so crazy, he said.

In the back I try to follow the curve of his head. That's the way it's layered, and I trim each layer.

Frank puts his hand back and feels it. "*There,*" he says, "and *there*. Isn't it too long?"

"Ah'll cut it fo' you, sah," I say. I'm afraid of cutting it too short, afraid he'll hate what I have done to him.

I clip along the back of his neck. Frank tucks his chin in and drops his head as though he is in church, a young penitent. The hair along the back of his neck is soft and fuzzy, a different texture from the rest. It's golden brown, and the skin just underneath it is not tanned, but pale and very soft. Each time I take a clump of hair, my fingers rub against the back of Frank's neck.

"What are those insects?" Frank asks.

"Katydid."s."

"But what's their real name?"

"I don't know how to pronounce it. Keep your head down." I push gently at his head.

"You know when I went into the city last week?" Frank's voice is a little choked, from keeping his head bent down so far. "I was walking along Park Avenue and I saw a car parked in front of a building, all loaded up with suitcases and things, a station wagon. There was a man getting out of it, and a woman, and there were two kids in the doorway of the building. I don't

know what made me think of it, but all of a sudden I thought she's not their mother. I kept watching them, even after I'd passed them on the sidewalk I kept turning back to look at them."

I keep on clipping Frank's hair.

"What did she do?" I ask.

"She just waited by the car. The man went over to the children and brought them back to the car."

"And did she kiss them?"

"I don't know," says Frank, "by then I was too far away. But I kept thinking how strange it must be for her, to be in the middle of someone else's family."

"It must be strange for the kids," I say.

Frank uncrosses his feet, then he crosses them again, left over right this time. "Well," he says.

"It makes me crazy sometimes," I say. "I take it out on you. But it isn't you." I have never told Frank that I love him.

"It's okay," Frank says, pushing his hair away from his forehead. "I mean, you're fine." He clears his throat. He is trying to put me at ease.

I have got to the front. "Do you have a part?" I ask.

Frank is outraged. "Je-sus. How long have you known me? I have *always* had a part."

"Well, part it, then," I say, clicking my scissors in the air as though I have other customers waiting.

He parts it, and I begin again: snip.

"You're done," I say at the end.

"Would you brush the hair off my shoulders?"

I begin to brush the hair off Frank's shoulders. He sits perfectly still. The sweat, that fine film of moisture, keeps the hairs sticky and heavy. They move a little bit when I brush them, but they don't fly lightly into the air. The palms of my hands, the tips of my fingers are damp, too. It is terribly hot. The skin I am brushing is no kin to me. His flesh is from another woman's body, a woman who still will not speak my name. Frank's shoulders are perfectly tanned and smooth, he is the youngest of young men, with

not a mark on him. I brush at him and brush at him, and begin to laugh.

“Mon, you look a wocko mon,” I say. “You look like a crazy mon. You grow de brown hair on de head, de brown hair on de back, de yellow hair on de legs.” I begin to sing “Yellow Hair,” to the tune of “Yellow Bird.”

“Yeah, well, who’s wacko around here,” Frank says. He stands up, brushing at himself, all around the back of his neck. He is five inches taller than me now. I stoop down and start petting the cat, who has been deposited on the lawn. The dog presses against my leg, lobbying for more attention. Frank goes into the house for a mirror. I crouch next to the animals, feeling strange. My dog rolls heavily onto her side, and lifts her front paw, tilting her chin to one side.

Frank comes out of the back door, letting the screen slam behind him. He has my silver-backed hand mirror stuck in the top of his shorts, like a gun.

“Well?” I ask.

“Good,” he says, “but I want the back shorter. I want it to look like Dad’s.”

“Okay,” I say, “get back in the chair.”

Again I bend over his hot back, sweeping each wisp of downy, golden-brown neck hair very carefully into a little clump, and carefully, very carefully, bringing the scissors alongside it, evenly, so that the cut will be straight, and so that the points will not prick Frank’s skin. I am trying not to touch Frank’s damp, innocent skin.