

The Wig

FIRST PRIZE

1993 SHORT SHORT STORY COMPETITION

My eight-year-old son found a wig in the garbage Dumpster this morning. I walked into the kitchen, highly irritated that I couldn't make a respectable knot in my green paisley tie, and there he was at the table, eating cereal and reading the funnies, the wig pulled tightly over his head like a football helmet. The wig was a dirty bush of curly blond hair, the kind you might see on a prostitute or someone who is trying to imitate Marilyn Monroe.

I asked where he got the wig and he told me, his mouth full of cereal. When I advised him that we don't wear things we find in the garbage, he simply continued eating and reading as if he didn't hear me.

I wanted him to take that wig off but I couldn't ask him to do it. I forgot all about my tie and going to work. I looked out the window where mist fell slowly on the street. I paced into the living room and back, trying not to look at my son. He ignored me. I could hear him munching cereal and rustling paper.

There was a picture, or a memory, real or imagined, that I couldn't get out of my mind: Last fall, before the accident, my wife was sitting in the chair where now my son always sits. She was reading the paper to see how the Blackhawks did the night before, and her sleep-mussed hair was only slightly longer and darker than the hair of my son's wig.

I wondered if my son had a similar picture in his head, or if he had a picture at all. I watched him and he finally looked up at me but his face was blank. He went back to his reading. I walked around the table, picked him up, and held him against my chest. I pressed my nose into that wig and it smelled not like the clean shampoo scent I might have been hoping for, but like old lettuce. I suppose it didn't matter at that point. My son put his smooth arms around my neck and for maybe a few seconds we were together again, the three of us.