

Trichy Stuff

By

Ayelet Schrek

Cast of Characters

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|-----------------|---|
| <u>Ayelet:</u> | Is narrating as an 18 year old. |
| <u>Mary:</u> | Is narrating as a 17 year old. In middle school her life was idyllic. |
| <u>Barbara:</u> | 38, high school English teacher, mother of Kayla. |
| <u>Kayla:</u> | Seven. Very bright. |

ACT I

Ayelet is standing on a dark stage facing the audience. An isolated light comes up on her and she begins speaking.

AYELET

When people find out I changed my name, they always ask, "What's your real name?" And I'll answer, "Ayelet is my real name. The name I was given at birth was Anna, but Ayelet? Ayelet's my real name." What I don't say is that I still use the name Anna, but for a different person. That's how I measure my life, BA and AA--Before Ayelet, After Ayelet.

I started asking people to call me Ayelet the summer before 7th grade, but her birth really occurred at the end of 4th. She began with an eyelash. And then another, and another, until--all gone! Eyebrows and head hair quickly follow suit.

Anna had beautiful hair. All the adults would say so. Long, thick, flowing auburn curls--a masterpiece of keratin. It was the thing she always got complimented on. Everyone has one--the thing that the adults always compliment. "Oh, bubaleh, what beautiful eyes you have, what a beautiful smile, such a clever child!" Hers was the hair. What a waste. Not a waste.

Ayelet doesn't get compliments on her hair. She doesn't expect any. Ayelet isn't Anna after all.

Who is Anna? Dead, or just a memory? Is the person we were yesterday real, or only the person we are today? I think Anna's real, and dead. But she wrote me into her will. She thought of me before her death, and conceived me with a pile of hair on the ground. And as she slowly died, I grew stronger; as her lungs failed, mine bloomed; her heartbeats were slowly smothered by mine. Yet I did not take life from her; she was dying, and so I struggled to ensure that her legacy would continue in me. It's like all those Hero's Journey stories, the mentor dies and hero must use all the mentor taught hero to succeed at fulfilling the mentor's goals, since the mentor can no longer. Except that I'm far wiser than Anna ever was. And if anything has been my mentor, it's Trich.

Trich? Oh, yes, there's a name for it. Turns out, other people do this, too. Turns out, I'm not alone. Right?

Mary enters into her own isolated light.

MARY

I started pulling for no good reason at all. I mean it wasn't like I experienced some great trauma or something, I wasn't raped or abused or...traumatized. I mean, my life was great. I had no reason to begin pulling.

It began two months and a day before I started high school. Exactly a week after graduating St. Catherine's Middle School. I gave our graduation speech--I mean we don't have valedictorians at St. Cathy, we're just a middle school you know, but if we did, I'd be it, so I got to give the graduation speech...so anyway I was up in front of the entire school and I just felt so...good. You know, like exactly where I needed to be. Like in my element. And I was giving the speech, and everyone was listening, like I could see them listening, how often does that happen? and I just realized...this is it. This is it, this is the last time they'll all be here listening to me. I mean I'd built that up you know, built up their respect, worked hard to make them pay attention--I campaigned for a solid month before any other candidates, everyone but Tammy Lewis dropped out--and I won their vote, but then I had to make them pay attention to me during morning announcements, which was a whole 'nother battle. But here they were giving me their complete undivided attention and I know my speech was good, like it was excellent, but that wasn't why they were listening. It was me. It was cause they wanted to hear me, wanted me to know they were listening. I didn't cry; I smiled instead. They loved that. And they cheered for me, rose for me. It was like every good thing all of them had ever felt for me was...crunched into that one moment. Compressed, yes, that's it. It was all there, all of it, for me.

And then it was gone. We graduated. Goodbye, keep in touch, I love you I love you I'll miss you.

And then I started pulling.

Barbara enters into her own isolated light.

BARBARA

I've pulled my hair since I was a child. I was home sick from school, and I was curled up on the couch, bored. I was playing with my hair, tugging at strands, and I suppose one just...came out. I don't really remember it so well. I don't know, it's not like it's drastically affected my life. I mean it's annoying, and I want to stop, but I don't pull enough for it to seem...abnormal. At least not visibly. It's just

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BARBARA (cont'd)

annoying because hair gets everywhere. When my older daughter started crawling, when she was a baby, it became a problem because she would find hairs on the floor which is just gross you know? So I tried harder to stop, but...I don't know, I mean it's not really that big a deal. It's just something I do. I know it's wrong, I know I shouldn't, but hey, everyone's got their bad habits, right?

The worst though was when my daughters started copying me. You know how little children will ape whatever they see their parents doing. Well, my older daughter Sophia started copying me, so then little Kayla started copying her...and I had to sit down with them and explain how it was a bad thing, how they shouldn't. I told them to tell me whenever they saw me doing it, so that I would stop. Because usually I don't realize, I don't know... Sophia stopped after I told her that. I think I scared her out of it. But Kayla...one day I walked into her room and saw her there, pulling. She's only seven! I saw her there pulling, and the only thing I could think was "this is my fault."

AYELET

My parents made me see a therapist, that summer right after I began pulling. Boy, I hated that. It made me feel like such a *freak*. It made me feel weak. I mean, what kind of fucked up ten-year-old is in therapy? I guess it just compounded all the things Trich was already making me feel. Ironic much? We did *visualizations*, and she set up this whole reward system; I'd get prizes for not pulling. The system helped to reinforce in my mind that pulling was a bad thing. A bad habit to be broken, like when I had stopped sucking my thumb. It was a rather destructive view, because of course the pulling continued, rewards or no. It just served to make me feel like...some kind of masochist. Did I know the word masochist at age ten? I can't remember.

BARBARA

I just feel really...*weird* about pulling. I like to think of myself as an in-control, upright person, but Trich is so...*masochistic*. I don't feel like a masochist, but I guess that's what I am. Which is *weird*.

MARY

The first lie I told my parents about Trich was this: My mother noticed a pile of hair on the floor by my bed. She asked me about it. I told her I had brushed my hair vigorously--I used that word, vigorously--that

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MARY (cont'd)

morning, and some hair had come out. She scolded me for not throwing away the discards--she used that word, discards. From then on, every morning before I left my room, I'd carefully pick up each little hair, wrap the discards in tissue and throw them away. My parents were very pleased when I began volunteering to take out the trash.

AYELET

I remember viscerally sitting in a circle on the floor of my 5th grade classroom, for what reason has long since escaped my mind. Someone noticed the pile of hair on the floor by my desk, pointed it out to someone, and the class made disgusted noises about it for a few moments. Rya Fishman made a joke about somebody balding and everyone laughed. Why is it that hair on the floor is disgusting, but hair on someone's head is desirable? What changes when the follicle leaves the scalp? We are given so many mixed messages about hair. Good in some places, bad in others.

MARY

I started shaving my legs that summer, because I was going into high school, and boys care about that shit in high school. Also, if I shaved every day, then I couldn't pull out my leg hair.

BARBARA

I'm a high school English teacher. It gets pretty stressful, but I love my job. Cause, you know, English is important. Duh. But you'd be amazed how many students don't seem to realize that.

Anyway, in my second year of teaching, I had this girl in my class, Jenny, and she'd always wear her hair in this super-tight ponytail. She'd tug at bits of hair until they came out of the ponytail, and when enough hair was outside, she'd pull it all out and redo it. This process happened at least twice a class. She felt very...familiar, from the moment of our first class, and I soon realized it was because her hair-behavior reminded me of my own. I didn't think it right to ask her about it, and she never said anything to me--why would she?--but I've always wondered. I mean, I can't be the only person in the world who pulls.

AYELET

They think Trich has a genetic component...and they don't really know much conclusively, but I definitely think it does. Because my mom doesn't have Trich per se, but she plays with her hair an awful lot.

BARBARA

My daughter pulls so much more than I do. For me, it's never been debilitating, but for her...once I walked into her room...

Kayla enters during above into her isolated light. The four women are now scattered across the stage, Barbara and Kayla the farthest from each other.

KAYLA

I see my mother coming toward me and I'm scared cause she's about to catch me red handed. Exhibit A is the hair on my floor, and exhibit B is the hair not on my head.

BARBARA

...and I could actually see her scalp through her hair, standing all the way back by the door, I could see three bald patches...

KAYLA

Guilty, guilty, guilty!

BARBARA

...and I just started crying, I started sobbing and I couldn't stop, I went to the bathroom but I think Kayla heard me anyway...

KAYLA

A life sentence.

BARBARA

...and part of me was glad that she heard because maybe that would help her stop.

KAYLA

She tells me it's wrong. She tells me I'm wrong. I don't want to do the wrong thing, but I'm still doing this. I don't understand why that is. I also don't understand why it's wrong.

There's a monster I keep in my closet. We have a deal. He can only open the door when the lights are out, and I only open the door when they're on. I call him Ted, after my stuffed bear. I talk about him to my mother and she thinks I'm talking about the bear but I'm not. It's like I'm tricking her but it's her fault for never asking the right question.

Ted and I don't like each other, he's a monster and I'm human. But we respect each other. That's why I keep him. Because we live well together.

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KAYLA (cont'd)

Ted is hairy everywhere but his head. He's a monster. Sometimes I wish I was a monster, because then I could fit in.

MARY

The more I tried to fit in the more I stuck out like a sore-fucking-thumb. My first day of school was a nightmare. I had started wearing bandanas you see to hide how thin my hair was getting. And it was fine until after lunch, when I had my first 9th grade history class. Mr. Miller. Uptight son-of-a-bitch. He told me to take my bandana off, that it wasn't proper to wear in class--I mean what century is this anyway?--and what choice did I have so I took it off and I could just feel everyone staring at me and it was like they knew, like they knew I was a freak, and I just burst into tears. Right there in the middle of everything. By the end of the day everyone had heard all about the freshie girl who had cried and fled from class when they took away her security bandana. From then on--from the very first day--and even though I never dared wear one again--I became the bandana girl.

AYELET

I wore bandanas everyday to school, staring from fifth grade up to when I graduated. When people would ask, I'd just tell them I really liked bandanas. Which of course was bull. But what was I going to say? I was hardly going to tell my fellow ten year olds that I compulsively pulled out my hair. How could they have understood; I barely did.

MARY

Mirrors became like car crashes; horrors but you can't look away. I was pulling furiously. Two months into high school, and my eyelashes and eyebrows were completely gone. Four months in and no amount of styling could cover the bald patches on my head. My arms grew raw and ragged and hairless. Five months and I stopped shaving my leg hair and began pulling it. I spent hours pulling every day; I'd pull instead of homework. And then one day I was masturbating, and I discovered that if I tugged at my pubic hair just hard enough, I received a sharp kind of pleasure. And then a hair came out...by the time I was six months into high school, I was pulling from everywhere on my body. Some places would hurt, some places bled, and I couldn't stop or even slow down. I stopped going to class; I couldn't face the stares. I started failing. Failing failing freak.

BARBARA

I use tricks to stop myself from pulling. Because sometimes I won't want to stop, sometimes it just feels so comforting and sometimes I need that comfort. So I'll tell myself things like "this is a vice" or "you'll regret it later" or "don't be a freak." And then I'll realize that even though it feels good it's wrong and I can, like, shame myself out of pulling. It works really well.

KAYLA

I think my mother is ashamed of me. She makes me wear hats and head scarves out in public so that no one can see the hair I'm missing. She vacuums my room a lot. She always points me out when my hand is near my hair. It makes me feel ashamed of me too.

AYELET

My hands...

I'm a really crafty person; that is I really like making things. When I was younger I would find things--random things, bits and scraps--lying around and make...something with them. I used to build towers out of toothpicks and glue and yarn for decoration. I made little origami creatures of my own design. I remember once I made a tunneled bridge out of admit one tickets. I must have used hundreds of them, taped together sparingly. It was about this big, pretty complex actually. I used triangles for the base because they're the strongest shape. I can't remember how long it took me or how old I actually was, but that bridge, that was legit. It lived under my bed for a while. I took it out years later and was astounded by the feeling I had that to make such a thing would be impossible. Like I wouldn't even know where to start. It's easy to create something perfect when you have no goal. I would make just to make.

I make other things now. I've "honed" my craft. I make beaded jewelry, my own designs. I guess it looks impressive when complete, but it's easy for me. Easy, cause I'm doing it for me, it is whatever I make it. There's no standard, no basis for achievement. I just know the beads and the string and the needle, know them like I know my hands, and I explore what they can do. It's all about exploration.

My hands create. My hands bead and fiddle, knit and sew, draw and shape and form and ape. My hands help me tell stories, they help me illustrate. My hands create.

My hands tear hair from my prickling scalp as if by removing little parts I could find wholeness. They

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AYELET (cont'd)

pluck and pick and grip and tug and cradle and curl and work and worry and hurt and soothe and hurt and soothe and hurt and soothe and hurt and soothe.

My hands destroy. My hands annoy and enjoy and toy and...betray.

Sometimes I feel like the product of my own body's betrayal. My hands are hit men for hire but who's doing the hiring? When the need is so dire, so acute that it becomes tangible, what does it matter if I sacrifice hair to make room for the matter that is need. So maybe my hands are delivering angels, mothers spoon-feeding soup to an ailing child and isn't it the attention much more than the soup that heals? If I need something and my body gives it me, shouldn't I be grateful? My body doesn't know it's socially unacceptable to pull out hair.

BARBARA

Sometimes I hate my hands for what they do to me. But then I remember that hands are only tools. Hating my hands is like shooting the messenger. But it's easier to hate my hands than myself.

AYELET

The thing that changed my life--changed my outlook, changed my life--was this: my mother told me, one day in fifth grade, that she wasn't going to judge my success with Trich by how much hair I had on my head, but by how I felt about myself. With this, she gave me permission to...to exist. She made me human again. Or just helped me see that human was all I'd ever been.

MARY

It took my parents a long time to catch on, and by the time they tried to do something it was too late. By then I was already in with what my mother would call "the wrong crowd." Wrong me, wrong crowd. The first time I cut history class I went to the library and read my comfort series Harry Potter in a secluded corner. I didn't go back to history that week, or the week after, and I soon finished the series and began walking. The campus was really big, and it was right next to this forest, so I'd sneak out of the building, hop the chain-link fence that marked the boundary of the school, and spend an hour walking the woods. Then one day I stumbled upon this grove, and there were a bunch of kids, all older than me, passing around a joint. I started to leave but one of them saw me, and pretty soon I was sitting with them, smoking. I'd never smoked before, but they were really nice about it. And they

(MORE)

MARY (cont'd)

didn't seem to care that my hair was patchy and my makeup thick; one girl with a lip piercing and purple hair even told me "nice look" with an approving nod, as if it were on purpose that I looked the way I did. Cause all of them looked different, they had all chosen to look different, and they accepted me as I was...because for them different was cool. One of them asked me how I managed to get my hair like that, and for the first time ever, I answered truthfully. I told them I pulled it. I told them I pulled it all. And they nodded like they got it. And they did. Cause they understood addiction. They might have been the wrong crowd for my mother. But they were the right crowd for the me I had become.

AYELET

The first person I told about Trich was not my best friend. She was a good friend, mind you, someone whom I loved and trusted...someone who was unusual herself, not in any specific way, just...funky. Just different. That made it easier. But I still felt numbingly resigned--that feeling you get when you commit yourself to inevitable disaster--when I decided to tell her. I was so sure that everything would change when I told her. That she'd see me, blink, and then see me differently. That she would be weirded out, that she'd be...weirded out...that she would still act like my friend but inside she'd want no more to do with me...with the freak me I'd revealed to her. I told her because I needed to tell someone. Because it was huge and I couldn't hold it in, because when we reach a certain point in feeling isolated, the only options are to reach out or embrace solitude...and I am a person who needs people. I told her. And nothing changed. Well it did--but not how I was expecting. It made us closer. It made me...She took in the information and...it was no big deal to her. She just...accepted it, acknowledged it, and then...life continued. Trich had become so huge, a monstrous looming figure in my life...but what I was seeing was merely the shadow of Trich, elongated by a peculiar sun. Hazel was far enough away from Trich that the rays of its sun did not fall on her, and she could see the *thing* rather than its projection. Which gave me the first hint that sheltering shade existed out there somewhere. Thus I began my journey for release.

BARBARA

I remember the day I told my husband--well he wasn't my husband yet, we were still just dating...well actually we were moving in together...which is why I told him. We were graduating college and we'd been dating for a

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BARBARA (cont'd)

year and a half, and we both needed a new place to live, and it wasn't like either of us had any money...so we decided to get a place together. I mean we wanted to, too. But I knew that if we were living together it would be hard to hide my pulling...so I decided to tell him.

It was so scary. I mean as much as I loved and trusted him, as much as part of me knew he wouldn't care, there was a side of me that felt sure that if he knew he would...bolt. Would be disgusted. Would break up with me and leave me alone.

AYELET

That's the worst part of Trich, the feeling of isolation, of aloneness. I suppose everyone feels that way, really, but Trich amplifies it. Most of the time we can ignore how alone we are, but Trich screams it in your face. Alone, alone, yells every hair that's on your head. Alone, alone, cries every hair that's not.

BARBARA

I don't know how I got up the courage to tell him. Well, it was the day we moved in together, so maybe it was just out of necessity. Maybe I figured he wouldn't want the bother of moving out after he had just moved in. Anyway, we we moved in, made love on our brand new bed, and then I told him: I pull out my own hair. He...he cradled me to his warm chest and said he knew. He had watched me pull my hair for a year and a half. And here I'd thought I'd been so subtle! I asked him why he had stayed with me, if he knew. Because I love you, Barbara. Because I love you.

MARY

My mom freaked when she found my stash. She decided to go snooping in my room when my grades came out at the end of the year. I had just gotten a fresh supply, so there was a lot there, and she flipped. She screamed and cried and didn't stop until I took advantage of her need to breathe and managed to slip in "it helps with the pulling." That stopped her short. She looked at me for a long time, her eyes on my fuzzy scalp, blinked once, and left the room. We didn't discussed my habit again for over a year. She'd even cover for me to my dad.

I discovered something miraculous during my backwoods history class that year, and soon during other classes as well: I don't pull when I'm high. Or at least, not on pot. I tried a bit of speed once...well that sucked for a lot of reasons. I pulled a bunch that night. But

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MARY (cont'd)

sitting there in the forest with my friends, high as the sky and twice as ethereal, I found my sanctuary...my refuge from myself. It only made sense to expand that refuge...Jody gave me a bit of her stash, and hooked me up with her dealer. And pretty soon I was high all the time, and the outlines of eyebrows and eyelashes were returning.

AYELET

Something incredible happened that 5th grade year. I had decided to try to feel good about myself, but every day I would look into the mirror and the first thing I would see was my glaring lack of eyebrows. Oh yah, they were all gone. I hated looking like that. And so I decided to stop pulling them. And I did.

It took me years to figure out how I did it, or to come to any sort of feasible hypothesis. At the time, it only affirmed in mind that if I wanted something enough, I could achieve it. This was good, because having eyebrows certainly boosted my self-esteem, and believing in your own will power is essential, but it also created a difficulty. By succeeding in ceasing to pull from my eyebrows, I had given myself more control over Trich...and more responsibility for it. If I could conquer it through sheer will, why was I still pulling elsewhere? Why had I ever pulled at all? Part of the lesson of Trich is how to give up control. It is possible to control and give up control simultaneously, but it is a difficult skill, and it complicated my attitude towards my Trich. But as Trich is highly complicated, the more complex view is ultimately the healthier one.

I now have an idea of why I was able to stop pulling from my eyebrows. I had, and have since, tried many times to stop pulling, and failed. But I think it comes down to what my mother said, about success being about me, not Trich.

It was like when I stopped sucking my thumb. I was six. My mom had been trying to get me to stop for years. She'd try strategies, she'd try cajoling...nothing worked. Until one day I decided I wanted to stop sucking. I wasn't a baby anymore. I was ready. And, cold-turkey, I stopped.

I think it was the same with my eyebrows. The person I saw in the mirror was different than the person I felt myself to be. It wasn't about stopping pulling, it was about...becoming myself.

MARY

I felt myself becoming a new person...again. That summer I got high every day, and slowly my hair formed like smoke, fragile but indicative. My parents were so pleased. They worked something out with school and I managed to turn my history incomplete into a solid C.

Something else big happened that summer. I started seeing Trey. He was a rising senior, and one of the people who comprised my forest sanctuary. We'd go over to his house, smoke, and fool around. We got to third base on our first date. I guess it was kind of fast, but...I mean I was just so...so grateful that, that anyone wanted me, and so I just...and I mean it was great, I mean I liked it. I'd had two boyfriends in middle school, but the most we ever did was kiss--well I guess I let Danny take my shirt off, but I kept my bra on for Christ's sake...

Yah, Trey was different. He made me feel desirable for the first time since I started pulling. I think his desire for me felt even better than the sex.

AYELET

Middle school is a strangely sexual time of life. Everything you're feeling is so new, so fresh...and you don't know what to do with it.

I had such a crush on Ben Schneider. My best friend also liked him. But it never caused a problem because neither of us ever considered him within our reach. He was tall and popular, with blonde hair and blue eyes. I've always had a lot of friends, but I've never been popular. And with Trich...well, I was able to regain my confidence as a person, because it had already been there, and Trich just obscured it for a time. But I had just begun to--well, I started liking Ben the same year I got Trich, and so I'd had no framework of sexual confidence pre-Trich. So when Trich took a swing at my self-esteem, it badly bruised my budding sexual identity. I did not feel desirable. Why would any guy want me when he could have a girl with hair?

BARBARA

Jim--my husband--was the first person I voluntarily told about pulling. I mean, my parents knew, and my brother, but they found out, which is different. I had dated guys before Jim, but I never needed to tell them, so I didn't. It felt so good to have him know. Because...because it's a part of me, like it or not! And...and to know me, you gotta know that. I mean to really know me...

(MORE)

BARBARA (cont'd)

I still don't really know who I am. I always thought I'd have figured it out by now.

AYELET

6th grade was the year I found myself again. I had by no means returned to what I was, but I had discovered the bird among the ashes. I started calling myself Ayelet that summer, sort of as a test run, and then upon returning to school I asked everyone to refer to me thusly.

I met a lot of resistance at first. People thought it was a joke, some strange phase or something. Some people downright refused. Some tried and failed. But eventually everyone was calling me Ayelet. I think they eventually realized how real this was to me. Years later my closest friends (who had struggled greatly to adjust to Ayelet) would tell me how it was actually rather easy to call me Ayelet, "cause it just felt right, it suited you, you know." But I guess a couple months to reach Ayelet was nothing compared to the years of calling me Anna, so maybe it was an easy transition after all.

KAYLA

Ted visited me last night. I kept my eyes closed so he would think I was sleeping cause I didn't feel like talking. I think it made him sad though because who else does he have to talk to?

It's day now so I turn the lights on and visit him. The light from my room shines into the closet, so I step in fast and close the door. It is dark and Ted and I talk for hours and hours and hours. Here, in the dark, talking, Ted can pretend that he's human, and I can forget.

AYELET

I had become Ayelet, and I had become sick of *secret*. It takes so much energy to have a secret. Every day arrived with the fear that something would happen and they'd find out. So when I got back to school I began speaking to the administration about arranging a time to "come out" to my grade about Trich. There was more resistance than I was expecting. I'm not really sure why; it was a small school and everything, logistics weren't a problem. But I fought for my time, and I got it. One beautiful day I stood in front of my grade and attempted to explain Trichotillomania. I didn't speak for long. But it was everything. And I'll never forget that when I asked for questions, the first one I received was "is there any way we can help?"

MARY

I lost my virginity to Trey in the middle of nowhere, and at the center of everything. We were outside, it was day time, I remember this bird kept chirping. It was a mockingbird, and I remember feeling this acute connection to it--to this bird that would take on different voices, play different roles...who had no one voice of its own to return to. There in the middle of nowhere, center of everything, I was Trey's Mary; he claimed me with every heavy breath. I spent a lot of time that summer and the following year as Trey's Mary; I liked her, liked being her--liked her. Or at least I didn't really like any of the other Marys I inhabited. Home Mary was a bitch, School Mary a bum, and both were freaks. I guess Trey's Mary was a freak too, but that was part of what made her special, made her his.

Sophomore year gave me the illusion that my life was alright. I had Trey, I was pulling much less, my grades picked up, I was even fighting less with my parents. A year's reprieve mistaken for commutation. For that following summer, like a hand slashing through smoke, a giant gash appeared in my fabricated reality, and I was brought back to...despair. That summer I was arrested.

BARBARA

I became a teacher because I love reading. All my life I've been interested in words and stories and language and I just figured teaching English would be the best way to engage with those things I love best. I mean I don't have the skill to be a writer or the patience for a librarian, and there are only so many ways you can get paid to work with words. I like teaching, but it does get really stressful sometimes, I mean it's a lot of work. A lot. And I have issues sometimes with anxiety. But it's fine, I mean it is what it is.

AYELET

Telling my grade about Trich was one of the better singular things I ever did for myself. Perhaps comparing myself to Atlas would be a bit hyperbolic, but the sensation of unburdening my secret was akin to lifting the world off my shoulders. I experienced a sense of relief, of release, that allowed me to move forward; my previous burden had rooted me to the spot. Mind you, Trich was still no picnic, but as the worst thing about Trich is its tendency to isolate, by telling my whole grade about it, I enabled myself to feel less alone. Nothing physically changed; I still wore my bandanas, I still pulled--but I no longer felt...ashamed. I had been fighting an internal war with shame, and--as I think is often the case--by revealing the root of my shame, I conquered it. Shame withers in daylight.

KAYLA

Yesterday Gracie from school asked me why do I always cover my head. I was going to tell her but Ms. Benson heard and came over and told Gracie she shouldn't ask questions like that. Gracie asked why and Ms. Benson said it wasn't polite.

But I don't see what was wrong with it. She wasn't being mean, she wasn't making fun of me. She was just asking me a question.

Ms. Benson thought she was stopping Grace from asking. But she was really stopping me from telling.

MARY

I met my dealer in the park, as usual. Sometimes Trey would come with me, but he had an appointment, so I went alone. They waited until we had made the exchange before revealing themselves. They arrested both of us and took us downtown in separate cars. They told me to call my parents and I said I didn't want to. They told me too bad so I called my mom. I thought she'd be furious but when she arrived twenty minutes later she was white as a sheet and just as silent. She didn't say a word as they interrogated me, as they offered me a deal in exchange for my testimony, as they gave me my probation officer's info and released me into my mom's custody. The ride home echoed with tension. It wasn't until we pulled up in our driveway that she turned to me and said "don't tell your father." She started to get out of the car, turned back, and added "and remember what the police said."

I sat there for another few minutes. I remembered what they'd said alright. They let me off with probation, but if they caught me with weed again it'd be straight to juvie. I had to stop smoking.

AYELET

That was about it for Trich during middle school. After I came out about it, I got more comfortable about actually letting people see me with my bandana off--not on a daily basis mind you, just for things like swimming or sleepovers. When friends came over, I'd go bare-headed. I was in a pretty good place.

I graduated and went to the school I could afford. They had a great drama department though, which I immediately involved myself in, and so I discovered an instant community before I had even started school. It made the transition so much easier.

MARY

I felt hyper and stressed out all the time. I started pulling more again. Trey and I had smoked a lot together, so it created a sort of rift...something we shared had been lost. Also, as the pulling got worse and worse, I wouldn't want him to see me...I'd only let him undress me in the dark, and our sex got more...clinical. More routine. By the time summer drew to a close, I think...I think he was glad to be leaving.

I returned to school as a junior without my lover and without my sanctuary.

AYELET

High school brought renewed secrecy; new people didn't know. But this time my secret didn't smother me; I was no longer afraid of it. I told everyone who asked. I told some who didn't. My new school let you wear hats in class, which I preferred to bandanas, and I had several that I wore daily. I spent my first year of high school lowering my academic expectations and becoming part of the theatre department. I got a lead in the spring drama--Mary in The Children's Hour--and I got hooked. Over my four years of high school I would participate in every production, twelve in all. Theatre gives me a lot of things, but I think one of the most relevant to Trich is a sense of perspective. You think pulling out hair's bad? Well, at least I'm not a sociopath that drives her teacher to suicide. At least I'm not living in the Warsaw Ghetto. At least I've never woken up to find myself transformed into a giant cockroach. Acting allows me to inhabit lives other than mine own, and (the dramas at least) always leave me with a sense of extreme gratitude. We've all got issues. Mine's not life-threatening, and it's one I'm well-equipped to handle. Theatre and Trich can both teach empathy, and I'm grateful for the empathy I've received from both.

BARBARA

I've recently started doing stand up at my local club on weekends. Not all the time, but about once a month. I mean I've always like telling stories, and I guess I'm funny, so...

I was at the club a couple of weekends ago, and I was listening to the act before mine, and this guys was telling a story about this day he was having, and it was actually pretty funny, but he got to this one point in his absurdly stressful day and he said--the audience was roaring--that he started tearing his hair out...and he reached up to his head and tugged...and off came

(MORE)

BARBARA (cont'd)

what was revealed to be a toupee...and he started going on and on about being bald...and I just couldn't listen. I don't even know why I reacted so strongly...I mean it's not like he was serious about pulling his hair, or--or maybe that's why--but I just. I felt exposed. I left.

MARY

Things got bad again. People who had forgotten the freak I was my freshman year remembered and avoided me, and I didn't even have my forest sanctuary to escape to. All the hair I had regrown was lost, was destroyed--I destroyed it. I was once again a freak alone.

AYELET

I started thinking about telling my school about Trich midway through my sophomore year, but by the time I had managed to arrange anything, it was already near the end of the year. So I just figured that it would make more sense to wait until my junior year--because I'd be spending more time with the next year's freshman than that year's seniors.

Sophomore year was great. I had a competent English teacher, which greatly improved my general mood, I TA'd for my former English teacher--we'd never had a TA at my school before, but I worked with the administration and they let me; I was generally interested in my classes and had really found my group of friends...most of whom were in the theatre department. I spent ridiculous amounts of time doing plays, so my fellow castmates were the people I spent time with.

Something huge happened regarding the spring drama that year. We were accepted into a program that took us to the Fringe Festival in Scotland to perform. We'd be traveling in the summer, but that spring play was the one we'd be taking. I still don't know what Ms. Russell--my director--saw in my sophomore self, but she not only accepted me into the company, but also asked me to co-adapt the play we would be performing, along with herself and who-happened-to-be my best friend. We took Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and turned it into a script. I played half of the human part of Gregor. Hah. I'm not going to even try to explain what we did with that play, it was incredibly complex, layers upon layers, to the point where it sounds utterly absurd...with I guess works for Kafka, but anyway, it's an experience that two years later I still haven't found the words for. But there's this: it was the purest form of collaborative creation I've ever

(MORE)

AYELET (cont'd)

experienced. I love creating things, from songs to jewelry, but I usually create in isolation. With *Metamorphosis*, each of us seventeen students and Ms. Russell and Joe, our technical director, each of us contributed to the creation of this work. We developed the play from the ground up. Someone, I can't remember who, said there are no true collaborations. I might have agreed pre-*Metamorphosis*. But...I guess what made it such a powerful experience was that it was the first time I experienced a group of people all giving of themselves to create a singular entity. I mean, I guess that happens on a certain level all the time, but usually with a play you...fill out the skeleton the playwright has already given you. With *The Metamorphosis*, we created...life. Each of us formed our own character(s), dug around inside ourselves for an unfettered truth, and then offered up our creations to form...a whole new organism. We formed a collective. I'm trying to find another way to say this because it sounds so cliché, but I really can't think of one, so I'll just say it: we created something that was greater than the sum of its parts. A body is comprised of different parts, all of which can be whole and functionable...but life...life is either there, or isn't, independent of the parts that enable it. One can string parts together and get a body...but somehow, miraculously, we imbued life.

KAYLA

Mom says hair is alive. She says split ends are really just dead hair. Hair that's on my head is alive and hair that I pull out is dead. That makes me a hair killer. But my hair belongs to me, it's mine, I would never pull someone else's hair. And hair is not like an animal, it doesn't live by itself, it only lives because I do. So...I don't want to be a killer, that's wrong, duh, but I don't feel like pulling my hair out is wrong...so I don't think pulling my hair out is killing after all. It's not killing, it's dying.

I don't really understand dying, but it's kind of like there and then not there, and that's what happens to my hair.

When our dog Sadie died mom said she was in a better place. But if that's true then why is killing people wrong? If you're just putting them in a better place? But I kind of get it, cause when I pull my hair out and it dies, it gets to be free. It's not stuck to my head, it can go off and have adventures. It gets to visit places I don't. Some of the places are better and some are prob'ly worse, but...

A lot of the things my mom tells me don't make sense. Because some things can't both be true. I don't know what's right.

MARY

When you're little, they read you all those stories about good and evil, right and wrong. They're supposed to teach you morality. But obviously morality isn't black and white, so why do they teach it that way? Why do they fill kids' heads with bullshit you have to unlearn when you're older?

Kayla exits.

In middle school they teach you school is good and drugs are bad. Stay in school, don't do drugs! Oops.

But they don't tell you what to do when school is bad. When every moment confined inside those colorless walls fills you with dread. When every moment you're being stared at, teased, or else fearing that you will be. Because you will be. Because your future looks just as grim as the present and you see no way out because you can't escape your own body, this body that you never agreed to, never wanted, but that the world identifies as yours.

AYELET

That year I experienced my first heartbreak. I don't really want to talk about it. Metamorphosis was a good antidote to my loneliness, but I had a pretty hard time with it, and well, I guess I always feel a bit lonely, even when surrounded by friends. Basically, this guy and I started liking each other, a lot, and then suddenly after spring break he was going out with my friend. He told me later he had liked both of us, and so had to choose...and chose her. But...it helped reaffirm in my mind that I was undesirable, that no one in their right mind would choose me. And I was still friends with both of them, so I spent a considerable amount of time acting like I was fine as my insides crumpled. Anyway...I don't know. It was a rough time.

BARBARA

I think it's really important to be able to laugh at yourself. I guess you could say my brand of humor is a mix between self-deprecating and self-inflating. Either way, it's all about me. Because if you can't laugh at yourself, you can't really laugh at anything. I mean what's true for the world should also be true for you, yah?

AYELET

Something good happened a couple of months later though. Something that gave me...I don't know, a shred of grace to cling to. My senior friend, Ben, invited me to prom. It was kinda funny, cause I'm not that girl who gets invited to prom as a sophomore...and yet there I was, among that select group of underclassmen. I was excited though, cause I love dancing, and...well, it gave me something to hold onto, you know? But the thing was, I couldn't just wear one of my hats to prom. I could get away with a bandana for swimming, or my black hat for more formal occasions...but this was prom. I had a dress, black, simple but flattering, I had the right pair of heels--let's be real, my only pair of heels--but what was I going to do about my head? I didn't have time to go out shopping, we were in tech, or nearabouts...I worried subconsciously about it for a few weeks...and then my mom, in savior-mode, brought me home this black, shimmery scarf that I could wrap around my head with acceptable allure. I decided it worked. I went to prom and had one of the better singular nights of my life; I danced with Ben for three hours and took but a single picture.

I love dancing. It's the only time I can really get outside my head. I spend so much time thinking. I can't sleep because I don't know how to shut my brain off. I'm constantly aware and processing everything around me, and how it relates to myself. But when I dance...when I reach a certain point, I stop thinking. I stop caring how I look or what they think of me, I just move out of some intrinsic instinct, some chemical reaction to the beat. It's when I feel most in my body. So much of the time I think of my brain and body as being separate entities, often in contradiction. When I dance, it all smooths out. The world around me becomes just as real as the world in my head. When I dance, I feel beautiful, because life is beautiful. When I dance I feel whole.

Barbara exits.

MARY

I stopped going to school entirely. There was nothing there for me anymore. The school would call my parents, who would ground me, but they both work during the day so they couldn't keep me in the house. They'd threaten and take away privileges but they no longer had any power over me. See I wasn't scared of them anymore. I had survived far worse than a parent's scorn. There was no one looking out for me so I stopped needing them, so when I refused to comply with my parents, they didn't have their care to take away. They had nothing. They

(MORE)

MARY (cont'd)

had me. I had been reduced, stripped bare by my own hands. No thing.

I'd leave the house early in the morning, same time as for school, and wander the streets. What a cliché, eh? I began by wandering randomly, but pretty soon I had developed a subconscious route. Up the street, cross, cut to the park, down the leaf-strewn hill, follow the narrowing brook, follow it like I could reach the end if I kept going long enough...reach the chain-link fence with the vagrant No Trespassing sign, decide not to climb it, turn around, leap the brook, follow it back on the opposite bank, find the stepping stones, step, up the sliding hill, cross, down the street, house.

I would pack a lunch and eat in the shade of that improbably grove, and I could almost pretend it was my sanctuary, the gnats my friends, the water smoke. I would sit for hours, sketching in a remnant of my past, a small green pad I had found in my desk. I used to sketch faces, now I drew trees.

One Tuesday I flew down the crackling hill to find a man. He was sitting under my favorite oak, getting high. He offered me a hit, and I said no. He shrugged. He kept smoking and I kept walking. He was gone when I returned.

The next day he wasn't there. He wasn't there the rest of that week.

But he was there on Tuesday. Every Tuesday. He became part of my aimless routine. Want? No. Shrug. Walk. Until one day I said yes.

AYELET

I told my school about Trich half-way through my Junior year. It was one of the more overwhelming weeks of my life; I had several large assignments due and was about to leave on a trip, so no extensions. I barely had time to prepare--but maybe that was a good thing. I didn't have time to stress. Or at least not about that. I made a note card that encapsulated my main points, and then trusted myself to know myself well enough to speak unscripted.

I don't really remember what I said, but I do remember certain things with sharp clarity. I remember sitting down in front of the entire school...and taking off my hat. That was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I knew, if I managed to do that, the rest would

(MORE)

AYELET (cont'd)

be a breeze. I took off my hat, my memory blurs--I spoke, I answered questions--and then the lens of hindsight focuses and I can remember the reactions I received. The countless people I'd never much talked to thanking me, praising me. The quick conversations, being stopped in the hallway, the emails...the immensely positive outpouring of solidarity from my community. Oh, there's one more thing I remember about speaking. The room was silent. I'd never heard so many people be so quiet. In some ways that was the greatest gift my community gave me: their total focus--the validation that I was worth focusing on.

I slowly stopped wearing hats. And towards the end of my junior year, I did what I had thought was impossible: I stopped pulling my eyelashes for two whole weeks. I had made myself vulnerable in front of my entire school, and I had never felt more subsequently secure.

MARY

I met with my probation officer one Friday a month. I did some research and found that if I didn't smoke the two weeks before my meeting, they couldn't detect it in my urine test. So on the first and second Tuesday of the month, the man would smoke with me and then sell me a week's supply, and on the third and fourth Tuesday, Want? No. Shrug. Walk. My probation officer wouldn't test me every meeting, but I was taking no chances. I really was careful.

AYELET

Junior year was rough. Everything, every single aspect of my life--family, social, theatre, school, everything was...complex. The people around me were having health issues, physical and mental. I was attempting to untangle myself from a triangular web while supporting my fellow angles through...trauma. I experienced another heartbreak. I was overworked to the point where I--and I'm pretty much the most scholastically motivated person I know--I was burnt out. Beyond. I was hollowed. I was directing and playwriting and acting and dramaturging...every aspect of my life required constant energy. Insomnia--a lifelong affliction--made even my nights energy-zapping. It was the hardest year of my life, including the early years of Trich. I'm still not sure how I managed to get through it all...and not only to survive it, but to thrive. I created so much that year. I grew. I gave and saved and shone. I think I'm more proud of that than anything: how I thrived while surviving. I am proud of it, but I'd never want to live it again. But I do know better

(MORE)

AYELET (cont'd)

now what I'm capable of. A lot...a lot of my fear went away that year. Because I guess I had learned that I was capable. That I could do good with hard things.

I began to discover the philosophy I had been subconsciously accruing over the past many years. It goes something like this:

I believe that we as human beings are driven to change; contentment is just the moment between getting what you wanted and realizing you want something else. If we were ever content, ever truly fulfilled, I think we would cease to exist as human beings. The very nature of being human is to seek, to journey.

This drive takes two forms: creation and destruction. We need to alter our world--in fact, I believe that everything we do comes from this need--and both creation and destruction will do so. And I believe our goal as human beings is to create more than we destroy; create as much as possible.

My junior year was chalk full of destruction. Yet out of this destruction I managed to create. I took decaying relationships and renewed them. I let my papa's quadruple bypass motivate me to invest more meaning into each of my heartbeats. I discovered how to balance the burden school had become, how to live in a state of heavy lifting and grow stronger from it. How to swim into the wave and appear on the other side, wounds stinging from the salt and starting to heal.

And I took the destruction that is Trich, and I created something important. And I only had to speak. I remember people telling me how brave I was, but for me it felt like a release, a relief. On a massive scale. But with my words I created a...a sanctuary. A space for people to be themselves, to reveal difficult things, and to feel secure.

I do not choose to pull, but I do choose to create.

MARY

February second was the day of bad news. The school called to tell my parents I was expelled, and my probation officer called to tell them my test had turned up positive. All three of them were waiting for me when I got home, along with two uniformed police officers. They met me outside, took me to the precinct before I had even entered the house. I had violated my probation--I had been caught.

AYELET

I finally got my big lead in the musical my senior year: The Witch in Into the Woods. Sondheim. Swoon. And for three weeks I stopped pulling my eyelashes.

MARY

This was it. They had promised jail and they meant it. They took me to court and set a low bail. It took me nearly a day to realize my parents had no intention of paying it.

AYELET

And then I stopped all together. The cessation correlated with my first romantic relationship--which was a mess I don't want to get into--but I can trace the day I stopped pulling my eyelashes to the day I found out he liked me. Loved me, wanted me. Eyelashes are such a, a symbol of femininity, you know, of romance, of seduction. And I had finally found in myself the seed of belief that I was desirable. So once again the image I had of myself didn't correspond to my physical appearance. So I changed it. And the mess of that relationship that ensued could not shake that seed. Of all the lies he told me, and himself--or really mainly me--I never had a reason to doubt he thought me desirable. And, after seven and a half years of daily pulling, I stopped where it had all began. It began with an eyelash. It ended with self-esteem. Well, ended is sort of a ridiculous statement; as long as I'm alive, Trich will never end. I still pull regularly from my head. And I'll be psychologically influenced, good and bad, by Trich. I have been I am I will be. I've been learning how to turn Trich from destruction to creation. I think I've done pretty well, but there's always more.

MARY

The judge, they tell me, was kind. She didn't sentence me to juvie or prison. She institutionalized me. She saw my marijuana use and my pulling as symptoms of deeper psychological trauma. She decided to help me. Here in what we--the inmates that is--like to call Little Bellevue, I am given daily strategies on how not to pull. I wear gloves and play with stress balls, I get rewarded for not pulling, and in the evenings I meet with a shrink, who plumbs the depths of my childhood for my obviously present damage. He finds nothing, and sometimes I have to tape my wrists to stop myself from tearing those fucking gloves off and raking my nails across my tingling scalp...but I'm pulling less I guess. The gloves help I mean. I have to wear them all the time because if I don't I'll pull. The judge said I'd have my case reviewed in nine months.

(MORE)

MARY (cont'd)

It's been six. Not much has changed except that I've found a new routine. They shaved my head so I couldn't get at my head hair; when it was long I could yank it out, gloves or no. But I still can get my eyelashes, eyebrows and pubic hair. It's the only thing keeping me sane. If I didn't have them, I think I would explode. I need it so bad...I can't describe it. They get really mad at me though, say I'm not trying. I am trying. I've stopped pulling from my arms and legs and head. That's a lot. It's almost more than I can handle.

I don't think they're going to let me out after nine months. Sometimes I think they'll never let me out. And sometimes, and this scares me more than anything, I don't even care.

Mary exits.

AYELET

The following words are not my own, and yet they are as true to me as anything: "Everything can be taken away from a [person] but one thing: the last of human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." The man who said this was Viktor Frankl. A man who used the destruction of the Holocaust to create messages of human hope and dignity.

All four women return to their isolated spots on stage.

I lack the freedom of control over my own body--we all do to a certain extent. But I always, always, have freedom over my attitude. Because if I were to let Trich make me hate myself, if I were to tear myself down over hair, I would be surrendering my freedom. Frankl presents us with a burden; happiness is difficult to achieve, it is much easier to blame fate for our unhappiness. But perhaps happiness is not meant to be achieved but experienced. And in Frankl's philosophy, in my philosophy, there is always hope. Not for a better future, but for a better present. And I am not alone, will never be alone, in wanting that.

The lights fade up during above to a general, warm wash. A beat, and then blackout.