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A long story:
Rapunzel-esque-hair fantasies come to life with the aid of extensions.

GOING LONG

NOT SATISFIED WITH THE THIN, SHOULDER-LENGTH STRANDS FATE GAVE HER, RUTH SHALIT SET OUT TO IMPROVE UPON MOTHER NATURE. WHAT SHE LEARNED WILL HELP ANYONE WHO'S EVER STRESSED OVER SKINNY HAIR

Many women find the months leading up to their wedding to be a rich and pure time: a time for growing and unfolding, for acquiring a houseful of gratin pans and demitasse spoons, for gamboling with their sweeties under the glow of the fiery setting sun.

For me, it was mainly about the hair.

I'd decided to forgo the updo in favor of long, free-flowing, wind-tossed ringlets. I wanted princess hair, sea nymph hair, hair so abundant it would tumble down over my round white shoulders and cascade past my breasts. Let other brides tote around tear sheets of Denise Richards and Carmen Electra from magazines: I drew my inspiration from bewitching fantasy sirens and goddesses of antiquity. I wasn't worried about the dress, the shoes, the veil—like Rubens' Andromeda or Titian's Flora, I would be gowned in my own hair.

"Aren't you afraid it will look a bit... unkempt?" asked my mother, whose bridal portrait depicts a petite, saucer-eyed young woman dwarfed by a spiraling centrifugal updo, piled high and laden with feathers and beads.

"Not unkempt!" I said. "Unbound. Untrammled." I showed her pictures of various lounging Parthenon goddesses and a Metropolitan Museum of Art postcard of a radiant Aphrodite rising from the foaming sea.

"I'm starting to feel a little anxious, timing-wise," said my hairstylist, Dasi Birenbaum of L.A.'s Euphoria Salon, as she ran her fingers through my straggly, shoulder-length locks. Her consternation was understandable: After a full year of growing out my hair; countless dollars spent on thickening creams, volume mists, protectants, and humectants; and an ill-fated dalliance with a hair vitamin created by a leonine-maned doctor at the University of Helsinki, I had made almost no progress. I didn't have the long, flowing hair of my sugarplum bridal fantasy. I didn't even have long hair. A month shy of my wedding it remained baby fine and stubbornly medium length. In the pantheon of popular feminine imagery, I was closer to Bridget Jones than to Botticelli.

"It's possible," Birenbaum said, "that you're at the end of your time line."

"What do you mean?" I asked, distracted. I was fanning my hair sexily across my chest, a maneuver that only drew attention to my split ends.

"Your hair has, you know, a time line," she said. "Like, it will grow to a certain point and then just stop growing. I have a lot of clients with this problem. They keep trimming it and trying to make it grow, but it keeps splitting."

Wilma Bergfeld, MD, a hair and scalp specialist at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, confirmed that hair follicles have their own capricious life cycle. "On a

healthy adult scalp, hair grows for five years before it starts to die," Bergfeld said. "Some people have a shorter cycle; some longer. Those are the women you see with hair down to their butt."

Was there anything I could do to trick my hair clock? "There's some evidence that diet and light exposure may affect hair growth," Bergfeld said. "Some people say you should stand on your head to stimulate circulation in the scalp. It's not going to hurt you."

"Of course," Bergfeld added, "there's no proof that it works."

This was depressing news. In my Arthur C. Clarke-like optimism, I'd thought that hair length was like hopes and dreams: limited only by the confines of my imagination. Now it seemed all of my striving had been in vain. I wouldn't have long hair for my wedding after all. I felt crushed by the soft bigotry of low expectations. I didn't know whether to cry, buy a waterfall veil, or write an article for a conservative policy journal.

I decided to fight back. On a friend's recommendation, I visited Linda Arnold, a Malibu stylist who works with high-end hairpieces. Arnold, a soft-spoken blond with a Zen way about her, reassured me I wasn't the only bride to need extra help. "Imagine how fine hair will look after 12 hours of sweating and dancing," she told me. "You need to subsidize your hair so that it's thick and full and lasts longer."

Arnold works with hair pieces designed by Danilo, a celebrity stylist who has created clip-ons for red-carpet A-listers. In the box Danilo's pieces—made from high-quality human hair and marketed under the Flawless by Danilo brand name—looked like floppy ferrets ready to pounce. When attached to my head, they created fantastic halos of candy-floss curls. Arnold beamed. "This one is called Faux Fatale," she said. "It's similar to a piece I used on Jennifer Coolidge in *Legally Blonde*. What's fun is that I made all these great hair ornaments to sit on top of it. We did a whole table setting for a Thanksgiving turkey on top of Jennifer's hair!"

"Hmm," I said. "Got anything else?"

Arnold interlocked two pieces over my ponytail. "Let's say you thought your ponytail was too skinny. So you put on a piece like this. It's very *I Dream of Jeannie*, don't you think?"

Leaving my high, swingy ponytail attached, Arnold clipped a wavy, layered piece to the nape of my neck. "This is a great look for brides," she said. "A lot of them get very uptight about their hair because they worry that they won't have enough. That's the beauty of pieces!"

But would I have too much hair? I put up a hand to touch the crenellated tower of honey-highlighted curls. "You're a subversive Renaissance Fair girl!" she exclaimed.

Perhaps there were other ways to become a faux fatale. I decided to look

into Great Lengths—the top-of-the-line, polymer-bonded hair extensions favored by such high-maintenance celebs as Jennifer Aniston and Michelle Pfeiffer. While couture hairpieces are an investment, extensions are a commitment, necessitating an all-day salon visit and scads of cash. I figured I'd run the idea by my fiancé.

Halfway through *Charlie Rose*, I turned to R. and said, "I'm thinking of getting hair extensions for our wedding."

R. looked at me, dumbfounded, as if I'd said I was thinking of getting prosthetic elf ears.

"Come on," I said, "it'll be fun."

I explained the importance of long, flowing hair: its role in history, its significance as a sign of sensuality and imperishable youth.

R. looked disgusted. "Hair extensions," he said. "Isn't that kind of like Lee Press-On Nails?"

Then he turned serious. "Why would you pick this day to wear somebody else's hair?" he asked. "Why would you want to be fake for our wedding? Why wouldn't you want to be real?"

"Oh, sweetie," I said, "you're right. I'll be real for you. I'll be real for us." I gave him a long, meaningful hug.

Several days later, in the airy, plant-filled John Frieda salon in Beverly Hills, I sipped espresso as stylist Louise Moon painstakingly applied 20-inch-long extensions to the base of my scalp. The hair *was* real, acquired at significant expense from distant lands and bonded

to my locks using a heated solution. Some of the hair was chestnut brown. Some of it was toffee color. A few bundles were golden blond. Moon and I picked the colors that morning, as we sat in a lovely open atrium overlooking a pool strewn with Vanda orchids. "Always choose your color in shaded natural light so you can see the true color of the hair," she had instructed as hummingbirds twittered overhead and aqua blue waters lapped gently by our feet.

Moon attached the strands in a checkerboard pattern, scattering the various shades all the way around the perimeter of the hair: "That way if you want to pull it back, you'll have more interest and contrast." I could see her pursing her lips as she applied the individual extensions, blending light and dark with the subtlety of a chiaroscuro painter. Suddenly, the old way of doing highlights—the foils, the heat lamps—seemed hopelessly behind the times. "See how we're just painting it on as we go?" Moon asked. "You see exactly what's being put on your head. That's very reassuring for the client."

It was reassuring—so much so that I barely flinched when she cracked open a bundle of jet-black extensions. "It's not going to look horrendously vampy," she soothed. "It's just a way to get really strong dimension."

Six hours later, I had a sleek curtain of brown hair that flowed almost to my waist—I had rocketed past Venus and Aphrodite and into the realm of Crys-

GROWTH INDUSTRY

When it comes to hair, thin is never in. Over-the-counter Rogaine is fast becoming Fifth Avenue's sexy secret for fullness. Colorist Kyle White at the Oscar Blandi Salon in Manhattan recommends it to clients who want the hair they had in high school—fuller, thicker, and stronger. "Rogaine's safe and it works," White says. While women experiencing severe shedding should see a doctor (hair loss can be a symptom of thyroid problems or lupus), those who notice their ponytail shrinking or their part widening can try topical minoxidil (the active ingredient in Rogaine) without worry. As for potential side effects, a University of British Columbia study found topical minoxidil to be cardiovascular- and pregnancy-complication risk-free. And according to Valerie D. Callender, MD, a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, DC, fears of increased facial hair are unfounded. Many dermatologists, including Callender, even advocate women skipping Women's Rogaine and starting with Men's Rogaine Extra Strength, which contains a 5 percent concentration of minoxidil instead of 2 percent. Regardless of the strength, minoxidil must be used for at least four months to see results, with continuous application afterward required to prevent the regrowth from falling out. The alcohol in the formula facilitates the penetration of minoxidil into hair follicles, but many users complain of mild scalp irritation (including more acne breakouts in the hairline area) and flaking. Hair-thickening shampoos and conditioners that soothe and heal the scalp, such as the Nioxin line, the Pantene Full & Thick collection, and the new Wella System Professional Sensitive shampoo and mask, can all help combat Rogaine's drying effect and ensure a healthy head of hair.—NING CHAO



tal Gayle. Before I could suggest that she'd overshot the mark, she got out her scissors and whacked off four inches. She then added long layers for a flattering, face-framing effect.

"Perfect," she said. She handed me a natural-bristle brush and a packet of dos and don'ts—do lather gently when shampooing (as infrequently as possible), don't apply heat directly to the bonds—and sent me on my way. "This suits you better than what you had."

She was right. My new hair was wavy, thick, abundant, and long. It spilled freely over my shoulders, slimming my face and making me feel like a sloe-eyed Semitic pinup girl. This was fairy-tale hair, sorceress hair, the hair that should have been my birthright. I felt no ambivalence, no tug of Velveteen Rabbit-like nostalgia for the limp locks of yesteryear. I felt the way I did after my first eyebrow wax: Oh, I get it. From now on, this is what I do.

But what to tell my fiancé? "Don't tell him a thing," said my friend P. "He probably won't even notice." P. knew of

what she spoke. She too had a head full of Great Lengths. "If he says anything, just say you've been taking vitamins."

"Wow," said R., "did you do something to your hair? It looks amazing!"

"It's vitamins," I trilled, twirling a new, wavy lock around my finger.

R. hugged and kissed me. "You've got, like, Brigitte Bardot hair!"

"Vitamins!" I sang as I wriggled out of his grasp. I didn't want R. to run his fingers through my hair and feel the rows of tiny nodes connecting me to the mother ship.

I was enchanted by my new locks. Here were exquisite, spun-sugar fantasy tresses that didn't need to be blown out, subdued by a flatiron, or coddled with conditioner. All I had to do was wash my hair, crunch it a bit with my fingers, and it instantly sprang into perfect pre-Raphaelite spirals.

For the first time in my life, I was a wash-and-wear girl. I canceled my weekly blow-outs. Men smiled and waved at me from their bicycles. The barista winked and gave me extra shots of espresso for free. Even my manicurist noticed a

change. "I see you get very thin!" she said as soon as I walked through the door of Toe Heaven. "Before... a little fat!" (I'd actually gained five pounds.)

Sure, there were trade-offs. For one, my friends were all sick to death of me. "I know, I know," one of my bridesmaids exploded after I called her at midnight to gush about you-know-what. "Your extensions are the fricking second coming. It's how we should solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis: Just give everyone hair extensions."

Sleep was also a problem. Though I'd been told to tie my hair up in a scrunchie before bed, I'd previously thrown them all away, thinking they were déclassé. So at night, as I tossed and turned and fretted about things like place cards, my hair grew increasingly tangled and matted. R. and I woke up more than once to discover that I'd unwittingly enfolded him in my snakelike tendrils.

Our wedding wasn't perfect. R. and I messed up our first dance. The restaurant insisted on taking calls for reservations during the ceremony. And my four-year-old niece fled the processional in tears, complaining that her dress was sweaty. But my hair looked fabulous.

"Did you know?" I asked R. It was a crisp, dry morning in Venice, California, two months after our nuptials. That afternoon I had an appointment at John Frieda to have my extensions taken out. I knew I'd likely never get them again. At \$3,000, they were a poetic bridal extravagance, not a plausible line item in a newlywed household budget.

The whole thing had left me a bit melancholy. I felt a sudden urge to confess all. "Come on," I said. "Admit it. You didn't know."

"I did know," my husband said.

"You did?"

"Yes. But I didn't figure it out for a long time. Not until I had my hands in there and I could feel something."

"I thought I fooled you."

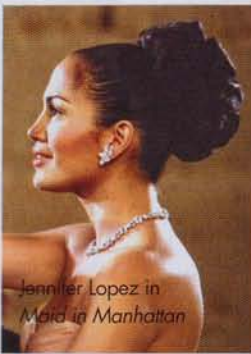
"I *was* fooled. I didn't feel them until our honeymoon. By that time it was too late! The deal was sealed."

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I said.

"Caveat emptor," R. said cheerfully. "That's all I can say to all the other men out there." □

A SEPARATE PIECE

It's inevitable that luxuries such as bespoke Birkin bags and Bulgari brooches lose luster in the eyes of the average Gulfstream V-jetting, Fifth Avenue penthouse-inhabiting socialite. After all, there are only so many ways that custom-made accessories, no matter how extravagant, can alter one's look during a season of benefits, galas, and gatherings. When the time comes for radical, temporary change that looks God-given, these traditionalists think outside the box: Instead of picking up a mass-manufactured hairpiece, they call New York City salon owner Garren. A veteran of more than 1,000 magazine cover shoots, he's used falls to lengthen the locks of the rich (Park Avenue and Palm Beach staples) and the famous (the majority of Hollywood's A-list). Hairpiece crafter Joan Sachs, Garren's collaborator, matches the texture of clients' hair to hair imported from Russia, India, or Europe before painstakingly weaving two strands at a time onto invisible lace or polyurethane caps in a process that takes at least two weeks to complete. The result blends in so seamlessly with what's already there that others swear one's head has been doused with Miracle-Gro. "It's like couture for hair," says Sachs, whose clients typically order multiple falls (costing between \$400 and \$6,000 each) to store in their many homes. These extensions may be especially popular now among the fete set (thanks to the voluminous 'dos on the runways), but they're nothing new in Hollywood. "All actresses, from Audrey Hepburn to Jennifer Lopez, use pieces," says Sachs, who is, in fact, Lopez's turn-to woman for hair falsies, including those for *Maid in Manhattan*. "Some don't want to get bangs or lack the time to grow out a cut—that's when they come to me." —EVA CHEN



Jennifer Lopez in *Maid in Manhattan*